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Computer active

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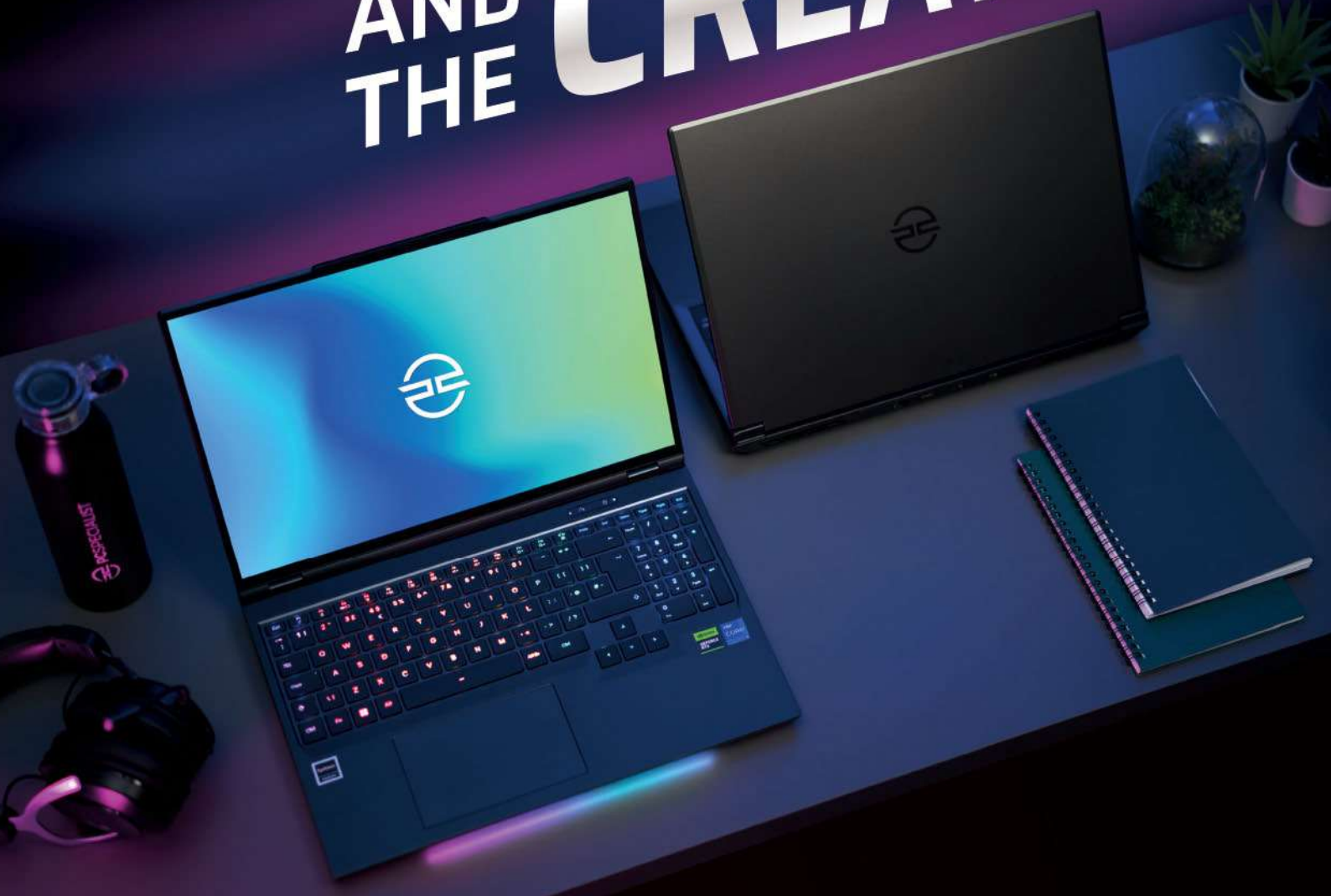
FOR THE GAMERS AND THE CREATORS



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From the Editor

When I bought my first TV over 30 years ago I think the only question I asked the sales assistant was whether it had Ceefax. If I'd asked about OLED, QLED, HDMI or HDR he'd have thought I was mad, speaking Polish, or complaining about a poor set of Scrabble letters.

You don't have to worry about Ceefax these days, but otherwise you need much more tech knowledge to be sure you're buying the kind of TV you want. Screens, resolutions, speakers, panels, ports, dynamic ranges, viewing angles – it can be bewildering, and that's before you start thinking about what to watch on them.

We demystify all this in our Cover Feature, starting with five golden rules of buying a TV before recommending the best budget, mid-range and top-end sets. Read the reviews then study the specifications and you should identify which TV is right for you. They're all unimaginably superior to the 14in portable I took home from Currys all those years ago.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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19 hours, 27 minutes
Battery life of the HP OmniBook X 14 laptop – *p23*

16GB
Minimum RAM you need to run Microsoft Flight Simulator 2024 – *p9*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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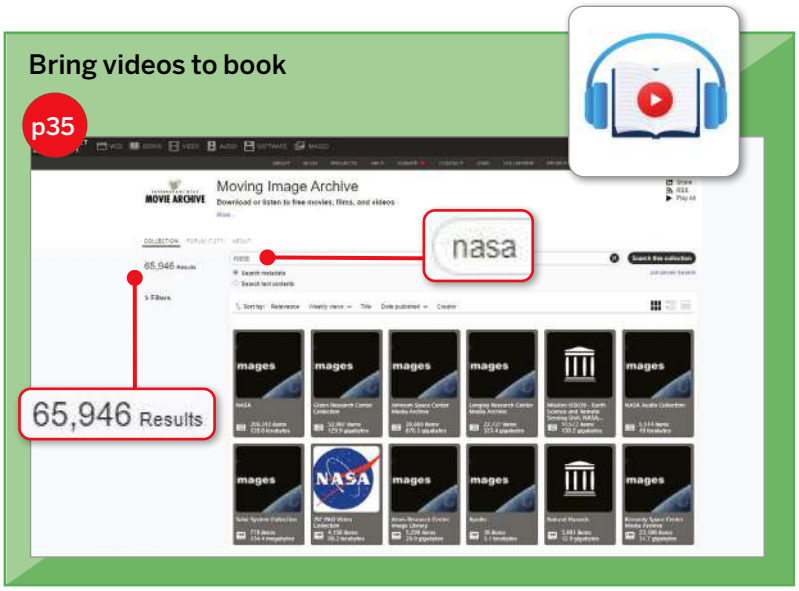


DON'T BUY THE WRONG SMART TV

COVER FEATURE P50

There are LOADS to choose from – so we explain which one is right for YOU

Why you need an AI PC

p62

Reap the benefits of AI today

Ofcom bans misleading use of 'full-fibre' for broadband

Internet providers must now only use 'full-fibre' to describe a broadband service if it delivers fibre cables all the way into the home. It's part of Ofcom's new rules that force companies to use "clear and unambiguous" terminology.

The regulator has banned use of the word 'fibre' on its own because it has been "applied inconsistently by the telecoms industry and often used to describe different types of networks, leading to confusion among customers".

Fibre transmits signals using laser light, which is faster and more reliable than copper.

In particular, some providers described their broadband as fibre if it used fibre as far as street cabinets, but switched to copper cables for the last few metres into the home.

Providers must now use 'part-fibre' to describe such connections, and 'copper' or 'cable' for those services.

They must also give consumers this information before they sign up, whether in person, over the phone or online, and explain it in the contract summary.

However, these rules only cover information given at the point of purchase, not before. This means providers can still use misleading terms on their websites – just not when you click to sign up.

The rules also don't cover advertising, which is overseen by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). This leaves companies free to use 'fibre' ambiguously in adverts.

Following research in 2017 the ASA said adverts using 'fibre broadband' to describe a service that uses copper from the cabinet *aren't* misleading.

At the time the Government's Digital Minister, Matt Hancock, said "adverts should be clear, and if it's fibre, it should say fibre. If it's not, it should not."

But following Ofcom's new rules the ASA said it will assess "what impact any new standards have on wider advertising practices around fibre".

It will also evaluate whether to change its rules "in the light of more recent developments and any related new compelling evidence".

WHAT WE THINK

We applaud Ofcom's intentions, but unless 'fibre' is also banned from providers' adverts and homepages, it's a recipe for even more confusion. What's more important is that companies are clear and upfront about the speeds you'll receive. The ASA already states that an advertised speed should be achievable for at least half of customers between peak hours (8-10pm), but those rules date from 2018. They should be updated so at least 75 per cent of customers can get the advertised speed.

Do you find broadband terminology misleading? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Samsung releases first Galaxy tablets with AI

Samsung has released its first Galaxy tablets with AI, but they're more than seven times as expensive as its cheapest model.

The Galaxy Tab S10 Ultra (left in photo, 14.6in screen) and Galaxy Tab S10+ (12.4in) are both equipped with the AI tools already found in the latest Galaxy phones.

These include 'Circle to Search' which lets you search for information by circling a word or image with your finger, and 'Sketch to Image' which turns basic drawings into more detailed images.

Both screens are Dynamic AMOLED 2X, which increases the number of times the screen updates per second from 60 to 120. This makes scrolling and gaming feel smoother.

The S10+ starts at £999 for 256GB RAM, while the Ultra costs from £1,349 for the same storage (www.snipca.com/52210). You can get £100 to £400 off when buying if you trade in an old Samsung tablet before 22 October.

For all Samsung's tablets, including the cheapest model, the Galaxy Tab A9 (£139), visit www.snipca.com/52211.

You'll like this...
Natural history channel Eden is on Freeview for first time (www.snipca.com/52213)

but not this...
Firefox has been accused of tracking users without permission (www.snipca.com/52212)

Google TV Streamer offers four times storage of Chromecast

Google has launched its TV Streamer box, offering more storage (32GB) than the existing 'Chromecast with Google TV' dongle (8GB).

It's also 22-per-cent faster, Google says, thanks to a more powerful processor.

Like its predecessor, it supports 4K, HDR10+ and Dolby Vision but adds support for Dolby Atmos. Instead of hanging from your TV's HDMI port like the dongle, the box sits next to or under your TV.

It also helps you find your remote control when you've lost it. Press the button on the back of the box for five seconds and the remote will make a beeping sound.

The remote will also make a noise if you say "Hey Google, find my remote" to any connected Google Assistant device, such as a Nest smart speaker or Pixel phone.

At the bottom right of the remote is an asterisk button that you can customise to open any app, or simply return to the Home screen. You can also set it as the source button for your TV.

Google TV Streamer costs £99, almost double the price of the 'Chromecast with Google TV' (£59.99), and comes only in an off-white colour called Porcelain. Order it from Google's store at www.snipca.com/52172.

We'll review the Google TV Streamer in our next issue – out Wednesday 23 October.

NEW ROKU BOX TAKES ON GOOGLE

Roku has announced a rival box to Google's TV Streamer, which has a new quad-core processor that it claims is 30-per-cent faster than any previous Roku player – making apps and programmes load quicker. Called the Roku Ultra, it has HDMI 2.1, Wi-Fi 6 and Bluetooth support for wireless headphones. It costs $99.99, but UK prices and availability have yet to be announced. Read more at www.snipca.com/52202.

Change where Snipping Tool saves your screenshots

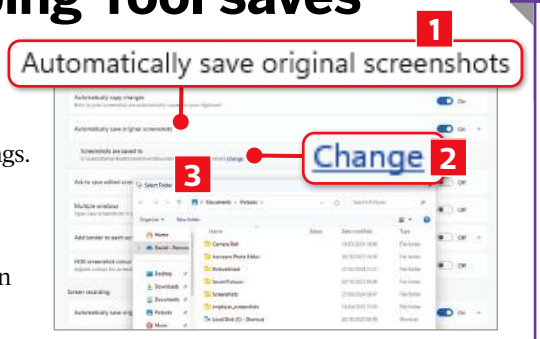
Microsoft will soon make it easy to choose which folder Windows 11's Snipping Tool saves your screenshots in.

Currently when you take a screenshot, Windows copies it to your clipboard and saves it in your Screenshots folder, which is inside the Pictures folder.

You can change this by editing the registry, but a recent update for Windows Insiders adds a more convenient option in Windows' settings.

To see it, open Snipping Tool then click the top-right three-dot menu and select Settings.

Now click 'Automatically save original screenshots' (1 in screenshot) and you'll see where screenshots are currently saved. Click the Change link 2 to choose a new folder on your computer 3.



The option appears in preview build 26120.1843, which was released on 20 September. It's probably too late to be included in the next major update (24H2), which is due this autumn, though it might appear in the first big update of 2025.

Also new in the preview build is the ability to share files from search results that appear in the taskbar's search box, and a media playback button on the Lock screen (see page 46).

IN BRIEF

FULL-SCREEN ADS APPEAR ON LG TVs

LG TVs are now showing full-screen adverts even when you're not watching any programmes. They've been spotted in the company's new G4 OLED TV, but you can turn them off by opening Settings, then selecting General followed by System Settings, Additional Settings. Now scroll down to and turn off Screen Saver Promotion so the bar is no longer green.

PAY TO SHARE DISNEY+ PASSWORDS

Disney+ has launched its Extra Members scheme, letting you share your password with people outside your household. You can only add one member and they can stream to only one device. It costs £3.99 a month on the 'Standard with Ads' package, and £4.99 a month on both Standard and Premium. Each member must be over 18 and live in the same country as you. For details visit www.snipca.com/52197.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

This is Mark Zuckerberg wearing Meta's new Orion glasses, which use augmented-reality to show digital information on 'top' of what you see in real life. He reckons they're "lightweight" and "stylish". We reckon he needs to take a look at himself in the mirror. Judge for yourself at www.snipca.com/52190.

IN BRIEF

LEXAR MAKES FIRST STEEL SD CARDS

Lexar has made what it claims are the world's first SD cards made from stainless steel. The US firm says they are "bend resistant" and have an IP68 rating, which means they're dust-proof and can survive being submerged in 1.5 metres of water. The 1TB Gold has a read speed of 280MB/s, and write speed of 205MB/s; 1TB Silver reads at 280MB/s and writes at 160MB/s. Lexar hasn't announced prices yet.

SKY'S 'FREE NOW TV TRIAL' ADVERT BANNED

Sky has been banned from repeating ads for a free trial of Now TV that didn't make it clear customers were signing up to a contract. When the trial ended it converted to one of Now TV's Boost packages, which cost up to £9 per month. Read the Advertising Standards Authority's verdict at www.snipca.com/52187.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

If you go down to the woods today, don't be surprised if a bear objects to you squatting in its den. That's what Serbian influencer Stefan Jankovic discovered while filming in Bosnia and Herzegovina (www.snipca.com/52170). It impressed his 950,000 Instagram fans, but we'd rather follow the bear (www.snipca.com/52171).

Scammers use fake Captchas to trick victims

Criminals are targeting PC users with fake Captcha tests that install malware designed to steal their details.

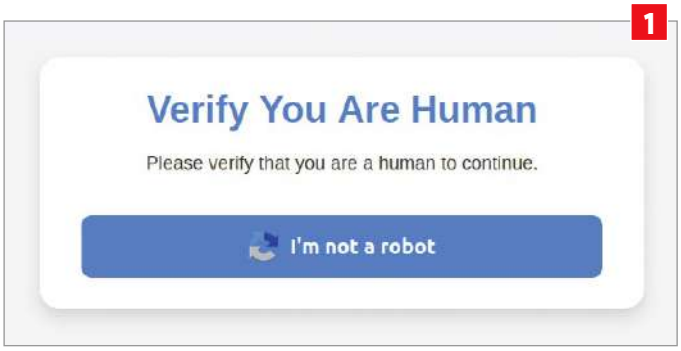
In one attack, software developers who use GitHub to share code were sent emails claiming there's a security flaw in their account.

Clicking the link in the email takes you to a web page titled 'Verify You Are Human' and with a blue 'I'm not a robot' button' (screenshot 1).

If you click the button, the next page asks you to take three steps to prove you're a real person, and not a bot 2.

First, you have to press Windows key+R to open the Run box, then press Ctrl+V to paste code from the Windows clipboard and press Enter to launch a PowerShell command.

Completing these actions allows the hackers to install the malware Lumma Stealer, which can grab passwords and other sensitive data saved on your computer.



The Captcha trick is also being used in an attack targeting people searching for illegal free copies of paid-for games, including *Cities: Skylines II* and *Hogwarts Legacy*. It appears when you click a link in Google results that promises 'cracked' or 'pirated' versions of games.

Over 2 million VPN passwords stolen in the past year

More than two million VPN passwords have been stolen in the past year, according to new research.

Analysis from Swedish security firm Specops found that over 1.3 million of the stolen passwords were for Proton VPN, which is one of the world's most popular VPNs and a *Computeractive* favourite.

Nearly 95,000 of the passwords were for ExpressVPN, while nearly 90,000 were for NordVPN – see the full list at www.snipca.com/52189.

Specops examined 2,151,523 passwords stolen in the 12 months to 20 August 2024. Most of them were unique or considered strong, though 123456 was the most common, being used more than 5,000 times. The next five most common were also strings of consecutive numbers.

Once they've got your password a hacker can disable all the protection you get from using a VPN, and even install malware on your computer or steal personal information such as your banking details.

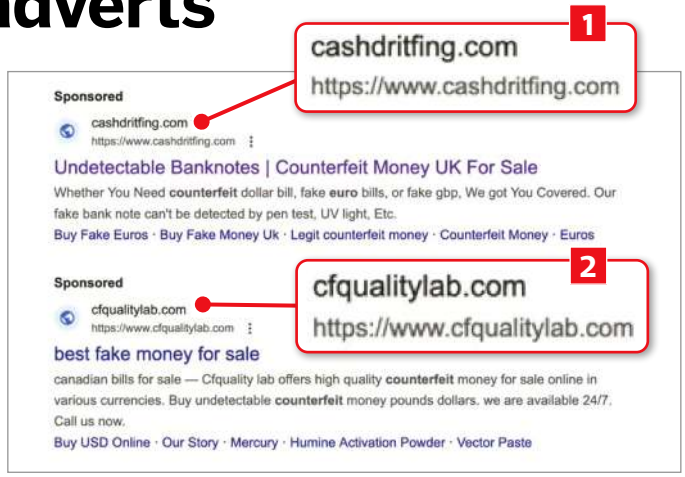
The passwords weren't stolen from VPNs themselves, but were included in data thefts and leaks. Visit 'Have I Been Pwned?' to see if your password has been stolen: www.snipca.com/52188.

Scammers 'sell' fake money in Google adverts

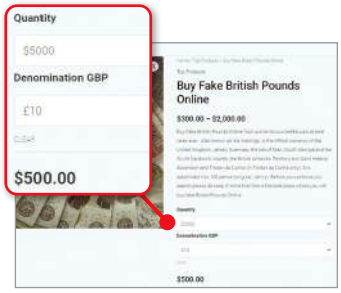
Fraudsters are advertising counterfeit money on Google and claiming the notes can't be detected.

The ads, which appear as 'Sponsored' search results, say the notes won't show up if tested by ultraviolet light.

One ad (1 in our screenshot right) uses 'cashdritfing' in its URL, which is seemingly a deliberate misspelling of 'cashdrifting', and the headline 'Undetectable Banknotes Counterfeit Money UK For Sale'. As well as British pounds, it claims to offer fake US dollars and euros.



Credit: Kelby McNally



The other site 2, 'cfqualitylab', says it provides Canadian notes alongside "various currencies".

The URL for cashdritfing doesn't work, but cfqualitylab is still online and claims the fake money is "perfectly reproduced, indistinguishable to the eye and the touch".

It sells fake UK money for prices that are one-tenth of the actual notes being provided. For example, a pack of fake UK notes worth the equivalent of 5,000 US dollars costs $500 (see screenshot left). The largest amount it sells is 20,000 dollars.

The ads have also appeared on Facebook and Instagram, though Meta, which owns both sites, says it has now removed them.

Using or distributing fake money can lead to a prison sentence of up to 10 years.

Microsoft doubles Flight Sim 2024 minimum RAM requirement to 16GB

Computers running Microsoft's Flight Simulator 2024 will need a minimum 16GB of RAM, double the requirement for the 2020 version.

However, Microsoft said the *recommended* RAM is 32GB, while to play Flight Simulator at peak performance you need 64GB – which it calls the 'Ideal Spec'.

It revealed the requirements in mid-September, confirming the game will be released on 19 November for Windows, Xbox Series X/S, and Xbox Cloud Gaming.

As well as 16GB RAM, the minimum specifications require an AMD Ryzen 2600X (released 2018) or Intel Core i7-6800K procesor (2016).

The recommended processors are AMD Ryzen 7 2700X (2018) or Intel Core i7-10700K (2020); while the ideal chips are AMD Ryzen 9 7900X (2022) or Intel it-14700K (2023).

Minimum graphics cards are the Radeon RX 5700 (2019) or GeForce GTX 970 (2014). Recommended are Radeon RX 5700 XT (2019) or GeForce RTX 2080 (2018); while ideal are Radeon RX 7900 XT or GeForce RTX 4080 (both 2022).

All three specifications – minimum, recommended and ideal – need 50GB storage

and the latest version of Windows 10. Visit www.snipca.com/52137 for full requirements.

There are four editions of the 2024 game: Standard (£69.99), Deluxe (£99.99), Premium Deluxe (£129.99) and Aviator (£199.99). For details and to pre-order visit www.snipca.com/52142.

IN BRIEF

ANKER RECALLS UNSAFE POWER BANKS

Anker has recalled three unsafe power banks because they could overheat, melt and catch fire. It said you should stop using the following models immediately: 334 MagoGo Battery (PowerCore 10K, pictured), Power Bank (20,000 mAh), and MagGo Power Bank (10,000 mAh). Their model numbers are A1642, A1647 and A1652, respectively. Visit Anker's site for details: www.snipca.com/52132.

NETFLIX AXES APP ON OLD iPADS

Netflix plans to end support for its app on old iPads and iPhones running iOS 16 that can't be updated to iOS 17. This includes the first-generation iPad Pro (2015) and the iPhone 8 and iPad 5 (both 2017). It said the app will continue to work on those devices, but will no longer be updated except for severe flaws.

UKTV AVAILABLE NOW ON FREELY TV

UKTV has added its channels to Freely's TV streaming service (U&Dave, U&Drama, U&Yesterday and U&W) as well as its on-demand catch-up tool. They're the first channels added to Freely beyond the UK's main terrestrial broadcasters: BBC, ITV and Channels 4 and 5. See page 55 for more information on Freely.

Will Windows 12 really look this hideous?

New icons from Microsoft are the worst we've ever seen

No matter how many useful tools an operating system has, if it doesn't look good then it will flop. We thought Microsoft had learned this lesson in 2007 after Windows Vista was criticised for being too colourful, three dimensional and flashy, while – five years later – Windows 8 was slammed for going to the other extreme with a flat and bland design.

But new images from Microsoft's design team suggest it's about to repeat this mistake. In a word, they look hideous. We realise it's a matter of taste, but we doubt many people will want them on their desktop.

The images, revealed in a blog post in September (www.snipca.com/52215), are meant to evolve Microsoft's 'Fluent' design style. Outlined in 2017, this adds light, depth and motion to icons and menus in Windows – and it's what you see in Windows 10 and 11. We think it looks great, and shouldn't be overhauled anytime soon.

But Microsoft's designers don't agree. Their images – which are shaped like PC icons you need to click to open tasks – look radically different to what we currently have. You can see them in the main image above right. The designers say they reflect "playfulness, collaboration, and inclusion, while driving inspiration and connection". To us, they look like shapes created by toddlers using Play-Doh stencils.

Many of the icons even fail the basic test of telling you what they're for. Yes, that icon top left 1 must be for email, while there are icons for chatting 2 and maybe a settings cog too 3. But what about 4? That looks like a nightlight for children to help them sleep. And is 5 a folder for your Valentine's Day poems?

The worst example is below left. If that's meant to be a notebook, why has it been glazed in glittery sand? Nobody over the age of eight uses purple crayons, so why use that to represent a pencil? And where is that yellow worm wriggling off to?

Nobody aged over eight uses purple crayons, so why use one in this icon?

Maybe we've lost our sense of fun. The designers use that icon as an example of how "dynamic elements spark curiosity, encouraging viewers to linger, explore, and discover". And being generous to them, perhaps the illustrations are the result of a brainstorming session where they were told to try anything. They don't say the icons will be added soon to Windows, let alone that they'll form part of Windows 12 (or whatever the next version is called).

Yet clearly these icons show where Microsoft's design is heading, and it seems to be driven as much by ideology as what looks good. One of the aims is to "avoid reinforcing stereotypes and instead promote a message of collective human potential and unity". Well, that's lovely, but is it enough of a reason to create the worst set of PC icons we've ever seen?

Microsoft already has a huge challenge persuading people to upgrade from Windows 10 to 11 ahead of ending support for the latter in October 2025. It's probably hoping to promote Windows 12 as one option for Windows 10 users looking to switch, bypassing 11 altogether. But this design will surely put them off.

Perhaps we're not the intended audience (too old and traditional), or just out of touch with modern tastes. Maybe you like these icons more than we do – let us know. Yet we suspect most people will find them patronising, infantile and baffling. Microsoft's designers should go back to the drawing board.

THE FACTS

- Microsoft has revealed a new batch of icon illustrations that "evolves" the company's Fluent design style
- They look more colourful and "playful" than the existing designs in Windows 10 and 11
- The icons haven't been added to Windows, but it suggests a change in design style for the next version of the operating system

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

'Bank' emails about new anti-fraud scheme

What's the threat?

Scammers posing as banks are sending emails that claim to contain details of a new scheme that offers more protection to victims of Authorised Push Payment (APP) fraud. This is when criminals impersonate a company or tradesperson that you're expecting an invoice from, and ask you to transfer money into their bank account.

The scam emails, first spotted by *Which?* in early September, pretend to be from NatWest and ask you to "verify" your mobile phone number so you can "get notified of any transactions carried out via your account right away". They were sent by 'dilbectkolumbus.fi', which has nothing to do with the bank. The 'fi' suffix indicates an email address registered in Finland.

Clicking the link in the email takes you to a fake NatWest site, which is among the more convincing copycats we've seen. It doesn't have any spelling mistakes and uses the correct logo for the bank (1 in our screenshot), though the logo for the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) is the old one 2. It asks for your customer number or card number, followed by your PIN, password and other personal details.

How can you stay safe?

Be suspicious of any emails that offer advice on the new scheme, and never enter your personal details to get information. For genuine information visit the Payment Systems Regulator's site (www.snipca.com/52108). You can see the real FSCS logo at www.fscs.org.uk.

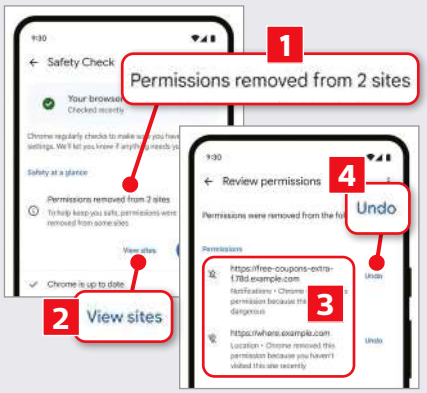
We expect to see many more scams relating to the scheme, which started on 7 October. They are likely to impersonate banks, other financial bodies and maybe even consumer champions such as MoneySavingExpert's Martin Lewis.

New tools | Chrome's automatic permission blocks

Since May 2020 Chrome's Safety Check has been working in the background to warn you about dodgy websites and downloads, so you can respond by manually blocking them. Now an update in version 129 of the browser takes action on your behalf, so you don't have to click anything to stay safe.

Google describes this as "taking more proactive steps to keep you safe", but you might worry that its decisions contain too many false positives – in other words, blocking safe sites. To reassure you, Chrome will show what actions it has taken. In its blog (www.snipca.com/52102), Google gives the example of removing permissions – such as accessing your location or using your camera – from two websites (1 in our screenshot).

Click/tap 'View sites' 2 and you'll see which sites Chrome has blocked permissions for 3. If you disagree with any, select Undo 4. Note that Google will also revoke permissions from sites "you don't visit anymore", which you may find rather presumptuous. It didn't say how it judges whether you've stopped visiting a site, however.



ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

Royal Mail twist on HMRC scam

Here's a twist on the perennial 'unpaid tax' scams that claim to be from HMRC. This one is an email, supposedly from Royal Mail, with the title 'Unsuccessful delivery attempt'. According to the message, which was suspiciously signed 'The Royal Mail Team', a large letter from HMRC had been "returned to our depot" and I had to "reschedule [my] package delivery". The scammers provided a 'Reschedule Now' button in the email. I wasn't daft enough to fall for it, so I deleted the email and blocked the sender. Sadly, it'll probably still earn the scammers a few quid.

Tom Nettleton

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

Openreach engineer hadn't reported missed appointment

I'd like to echo your advice in Issue 693's Consumeractive that you can't assume an internet provider will process your automatic compensation if an engineer misses an appointment. As far as I can gather, the engineer has to record it as missed, and surely some wouldn't want to because it might be their fault.

I decided to phone BT a week after my Openreach appointment was missed just to check I'd receive compensation. The person I spoke to said there was nothing on the system to indicate that the appointment wasn't fulfilled. I asked why, and he said the engineer hadn't reported it. It was clearly a good job I checked.

The assistant then said he could add it to the system, and confirmed my compensation would be paid after 30 days. There's still a week to go before that date, and I'm not convinced it'll be paid. If not, I'll be making another frustrated call to BT.

Andrew Cooke

BT needed What3Words to fix broadband cabinet

Following recent letters about What3Words (www.what3words.com), I tried reporting to BT a broadband cabinet that had its front missing. They could see it on Google Maps, but said I couldn't report it unless I gave the location using the three words provided by What3Words. I didn't know how to do this, so had to give up, leaving the cabinet in a dangerous condition.

Keith Norton

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Eight-hour batteries will be too expensive for providers

I'll be amazed if the Government persuades internet providers to offer battery units that last as long as eight hours (Issue 693, page 6). These backups cost a lot to make and providers won't want to offer them to customers who can simply switch to another company at the end of their contract.

Also, what incentive is there for energy companies to urgently fix power cuts if they know vulnerable customers will have access to calls for eight hours? It risks shifting the priority from restoring power quickly to ensuring people still have some power if only for a limited period.

It wouldn't surprise me if the costs involved lead to providers offering alternatives, such as mobile phones with a dock that's permanently plugged in. It can have a SIM card that's able to connect to any network.

Michael Donne

Wild goose chase when recycling light bulbs

Following Jorgen Stepputat's letter (Issue 693) about having to drive to drop off USB sticks in Scotland, I recently contacted Sutton Council, which boasts about its above-average record when recycling low-wattage light bulbs. I was sent to a list of places, some of which were over five miles away, and shops that no longer existed.

I asked why they just don't have a box in the town-centre library, only to be told it would be a health hazard. Yet this is the same council who has a depository for knives and guns down a side alley where anyone with the right equipment could help themselves. Sometimes I wonder if the home for the bemused I'm headed for has decent Wi-Fi.

Ian Walters

Dilute isopropanol for cleaning devices

In Issue 693's Reader Support (page 71) you featured Mark Howarth's question about the relative merits of isopropanol and ethanol for cleaning devices. Mark confuses the issue by mentioning methylated spirits, which comprises several other ingredients (including methanol) in addition to ethanol.

The Wikipedia entry for denatured alcohol (www.snipca.com/52122) explains these additional ingredients and why they are present. It's not at all surprising that cleaning with methylated spirits might result in some sort of residue being left behind.

The simple answer is there are few restrictions on the purchase of isopropanol, but the purchase of pure ethanol is near impossible for most people and would be subject anyway to excise duty. In addition, there is little actual difference in the evaporation of ethanol and isopropanol, though the latter does tend to take a little longer. Diluting either with water will increase the evaporation time for both.

In summary, Mark ought to buy 100-per-cent isopropanol which is widely available, and dilute it if he wishes.

Raymond Dalgleish

What's the Issue...?

With Christmas approaching, I want to reread that feature on Amazon's secret bargains. When was it?

Simon Reynolds

CA SAYS In Issue 671, page 62.

When did you explain how to install Linux Ubuntu on an old Windows laptop?

Ian Whiteley

CA SAYS In Issue 657's How To (page 35). Read it and the feature above on our 2023 Back Issue CD: www.snipca.com/48860

I need to create a custom email address, so when was that 'Easy When You Know How' column that explained how to do it?

Frank Reid

CA SAYS In Issue 682, page 74. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/52121.

Landlines v mobile? You can have both!

I don't understand the debate about whether a landline is better than a mobile phone. You can have both, you know! At home, I still prefer making and receiving calls on my landline. It beats having to wander upstairs and downstairs trying to get a mobile signal. Indeed, I very rarely have my mobile switched on at home. If someone needs to reach me they know they have to call my landline.

But as David Eaglesham rightly points out (Letters, Issue 693), I can't take my landline down the pub – or indeed anywhere – which is when my mobile comes in handy. I use it for catching up on the news, sending WhatsApp photos, buying car-park tickets and so on.

So let's have less of this false argument between mobiles and landlines. They both serve a purpose and using the latter doesn't mean you're baffled by the former.

Len Howard

TalkTalk mismanaged my move from Octopus

Malcolm Lee's case in Issue 692's Consumeractive, when his Shell Energy broadband account was moved to TalkTalk via Octopus Energy, has much in common with my own experience. I believe the transfer was handled very badly, and that customers were the last priority on the minds of the parties concerned.

Originally I had a broadband account with the Post Office, which included my landline phone and up to five email accounts with the @mypostoffice.co.uk address. After several years the Post Office sold their broadband service to Shell Energy, who honoured the service and retained the five email accounts.

Everything continued to work fine for a few years, but things started to go wrong when Octopus sold Shell to TalkTalk. Communication was minimal and it was never made clear to customers that TalkTalk wouldn't be taking on existing email accounts. I only discovered this when I had other minor problems and had to contact TalkTalk. It quickly became clear the customer-service team wasn't clued up about what was happening.

Fortunately, despite being in my eighties, I'm reasonably technically aware and opened a new free email account with GMX, which allowed me to include several alias sub accounts to use with my former Post Office accounts. The next thing was to inform all my contacts.

I don't know how long I'll stay with TalkTalk. The general service is reasonable, but what it will cost when the existing contract finishes may encourage me to look elsewhere.

Chris Nother

STAR LETTER

Tech *isn't* getting worse – we live in amazing times

I disagree with Derek Lawson's verdict that everything in technology is getting worse (Letters, Issue 693), though I realise many people share his view. The real problem isn't a deterioration in services, but how the public has become spoilt by the incredible advances in technology over the past 30 years.

In short, we expect everything to be perfect and cheap forever. We forget that this has never been the case. My internet is many times faster than it was 20 years ago, and hardly ever goes down. I get a fast 4G – and these days more frequently 5G – mobile connection, where less than 10 years I struggled to get anything.

I can buy 1TB portable hard drives for less than £40 and 55in TVs for under £500. I can play almost any song ever recorded for free on YouTube. I can record 4K videos on my phone and see my cousins in Australia while chatting to them. For most of my 76 years none of this would've been possible. We live in amazing times.

I don't blame people for moaning about streaming services removing recording options, but they should bear in mind that these companies can do what they like within the law.

Things are changing fast anyway, and for every site that does something to annoy customers I bet there are plenty who are planning to fill the gap. We just have to wait for the next generation of companies to challenge the likes of Netflix, YouTube, the BBC and so on. It makes me optimistic for the future.

James Barry

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Is BBC panicking over falling viewer numbers?

It's annoying that the BBC has asked EE to stop offering the record option on its TV boxes (Issue 692, page 6), but as you point out there will always be ways to record on PCs and smart devices. But I'm wondering whether the BBC is panicking about dwindling viewer numbers, and is hoping to retain viewers by making shows available either only live or on-demand via their sites. Maybe watching something twice will only be possible via the iPlayer. The BBC has never had such competition before either.

As for the BBC's use of AI for subtitles, perhaps it could apply this to its news shows and other live broadcasts as the current offering is pathetic. It's nearly always out of sync and inaccurate and words often changed from the dialogue. My iPhone was providing me better subtitles on the fly than the show itself.

Simon Musgrove

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Do I have to put up with another repair?

LEAD CASE

Q I bought a Citizen watch for £78.99 from Hogies Online (www.hogiesonline.co.uk). It stopped working the day after it arrived, and Hogies said it was probably a battery problem so I returned it for repair. But more faults occurred after it was returned to me, so do I have to send it back again for another repair?

David Townsend

A No, David doesn't have to send the watch back for another repair. Under the Consumer Rights Act, retailers are allowed only one attempt to repair a product, and if it fails they must process a refund if the customer wants this. It doesn't matter whether the fault is the same as before or a different one.

You have 30 days from delivery to demand a refund for faulty items, so David could have asked for his money back as soon as the watch stopped working on day one. But as he wanted this particular model of watch, he allowed Hogies to attempt a repair.

David likes the watch, so he isn't sure he wants a refund. Ideally, he'd like Hogies to supply a new working model – though not a refurbished or repaired one. He doesn't need to worry about any replacement being faulty because by law it's seen as a new purchase, so he'll be entitled to a refund or another replacement. However, this also means Hogies will be allowed to attempt a repair if it becomes faulty after 30 days.

If a fault appeared after six months, David would have to prove it was inherent. This often means paying for an independent inspection – though Hogies would have to refund this if it agreed there was a fault.

CASE ONGOING

Can Dell refuse refund for faulty PC?

Q I bought a Dell All-in-One computer in August but when it arrived it was faulty. I returned it for a replacement, which was delivered in the middle of September, but this also turned out to be faulty. Dell's website says I can't return it. Am I stuck with a useless computer?

David Orton

A No, David isn't stuck with a faulty computer. In fact, he can return it for a full refund, and doesn't have to prove that the fault is inherent. Like David Townsend (left), he was actually entitled to a refund for the first faulty PC he received, provided he asked for one within 30 days. After this, Dell would have been permitted to attempt one (and only one) repair.

We'll ask Dell why its website is mistakenly telling David he's not entitled to a refund. It's terrible service, and makes us wonder how many other customers Dell has left frustrated. We'll also ask whether it may have accidentally returned the original faulty PC to him. David thinks this might be the case because it has an identical problem.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

We persuaded Sainsbury's to issue a refund from Argos

We managed to get a full refund for reader Billy Hamilton after Argos was unable to deliver a PC to his home in Northern Ireland (see Issue 693). However, we had to go through its parent company Sainsbury's, which bought Argos in 2016.

Billy thought the problem might have been due to the fact that he agreed to pay in installments over three months using the credit service Klarna (www.klarna.com). Klarna was only able to refund the amount Argos told it to, which was just £163. This was almost half the cost of the first installment (£319.99) and didn't include the £154.99 he'd paid for the warranty.

Sainsbury's told us it had made a mistake by not cancelling the warranty contract, though it didn't explain why the first refund was so low. It apologised to Billy and also gave him a £40 voucher to spend at Argos.

Billy is pleased with this outcome and said he's happy with the way Sainsbury's handled his complaint.

Sainsbury's Argos

If you have a problem with Argos and can't get any joy from its customer support, try emailing Sainsbury's CEO Simon Roberts. You'll find his contact details at www.snipca.com/52199.

How can I help eBay buyer receive item I sold?

Q In July I sold a guitar combo amplifier on eBay for £140, noting that it had to be collected from me personally. The buyer didn't notice this, so asked to cancel the transaction. This is when things started to go wrong. I offered to send it to him at no cost, and asked for his address. He then asked me for *my* address so he could send a courier to collect it. I'd rather refund him or send it to him. What should I do now?

Donald Hall

A There's not a lot Donald can do on his own, so we've asked him for permission to contact eBay on his behalf. We'll ask the site for advice, because Donald is trying to do the right thing. He's still got the buyer's money and has been unable to process a refund through PayPal. And he can't post the item because he doesn't have an address.

Although we have the buyer's name and could try to use his eBay identity to email him, we're not sure whether we'll make contact. Legally, the buyer is entitled to receive his purchase or a refund, and Donald doesn't want to profit from a sale he can't fufill. He also wants to avoid an unhappy customer leaving negative feedback.

CASE ONGOING

Why has Virgin Media O2 closed my account?

Q At the end of May I received 'confirmation' from Virgin Media O2 that my request to cancel my mobile account had been approved. This came as a surprise because I'd never asked for it. To complicate matters, in June it asked me for payments – even though I had apparently cancelled the account. It's all very confusing and I'm getting nowhere with Virgin Media O2. Perhaps you can.

David Summerville

A When we contacted Virgin Media O2, it told us it had settled the case by restoring David's account. We thought the problem may have been with the company's accounts and billing systems, but it told us it had suspected fraud. It was happy to reinstate David's account once it realised this was not the case.

David is satisfied with this outcome because he simply wanted the company to restore all four of his family's numbers and to honour his original contract.

This case sounds strangely similar to Simon Curtis's in Issue 686, in which Virgin Media O2 stopped taking the correct money from his account. This was particularly worrying for him because his son was studying in Germany for a year and needed his phone to keep in touch with his family.

It's possible the source of these problems may be that Virgin Mobile customers were transferred to O2 after the two companies merged, but we doubt we'll ever find out for sure.

CASE CLOSED

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Virgin moved me to digital quickly and neatly

I want to congratulate Virgin Media for the efficient way it transferred me to its digital phone service. My router was upstairs and my landline was in the living room. This had been the situation ever since my first dial-up connection with NTL, back in the days when companies provided a second line for a computer at no extra cost.

Virgin sent me an email about the switch, telling me that if I needed more than the small adapter it provided, I should call its customer services. I did this and three days later an engineer arrived to connect a new line to the outside box, which entailed drilling through my bay window. They then moved my phone line downstairs and connected it. The entire operation took less than 50 minutes, and was completed very neatly.

I feel rather tied to Virgin for my broadband because I've always used the company's email service. But it does give me a good deal every time my contract is up. I'm happy to stay, because I've never had any internet problems with them.

Marcus Garside

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Virgin Media

- **Tel 0345 454 1111**
- **WhatsApp 0730 532 7112**

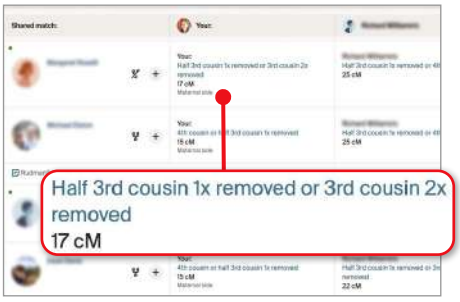
Grow Your Family Tree

For better DNA results, lists of errors and attractive 'fan' charts, follow Judith Batchelor's advice to. . .

Master Ancestry's new Pro Tools

Ancestry has launched its Pro Tools in the UK, offering advanced features to improve your research. Our favourite is the 'Enhanced shared matches' DNA tool, which makes it easier to identify your DNA matches. Its tree-checker is also useful, while 'fan' charts provide a visually interesting way to illustrate your tree.

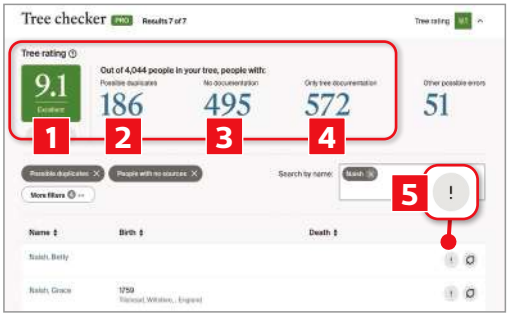
You can buy Pro Tools as an add-on to your regular subscription for £7.99 a month – just click 'Upgrade to Pro Tools' in the menu above your tree. Your subscription will renew automatically every month, but you can cancel within two days, which means you can give Pro Tools a try without making a long-term commitment. Sign up and see all the features at www.snipca.com/52127.



The advanced DNA search in Ancestry's Pro Tools helped Judith find several cousins third and fourth removed

To determine a relationship between you and a DNA match, you often need to look at your list of shared matches and those of any associated online trees (see Issues 648 and 649 for more details). With Pro Tools, however, you can now scroll down the list and see how much DNA your matches share with each other, as well as with you. This makes it far easier to identify matches, especially when a close match has no tree but there is one for their close relative.

Pro Tools also shows relatives who share 7cM (centimorgan) to 19cM of your DNA, rather than stopping at 20cM as the standard AncestryDNA service does. This helps you find family members who are more distantly related. When I searched, I found several cousins third and fourth removed (see screenshot left), all with cMs between 7 and 19.

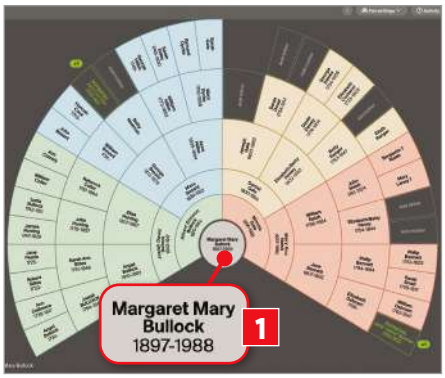


Use the 'Tree checker' to find errors such as duplicate entries and those

Weed out duplicates and create a fan chart

The 'Tree checker' looks for any errors that may have crept into your family tree, and gives you a tree 'rating' out of 10 (1 in screenshot above). It shows how many duplicate entries your tree contains 2, as well as how many entries lack documentation 3 or have no sources linked to them (only tree documantation) 4. Click the exclamation mark 5 to find out more about a particular error.

Another new feature lets you view your tree as a circular 'fan' chart. The default view places you in the centre of the fan, but you can change this to any ancestor (1 in screenshot below). Simply right-click the person's name, then select View Tree. You'll find the option to produce a fan chart under 'More Pro Tools' in the Pro Tools shortcuts box on your home page.



View your family tree as a circular 'fan' chart

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

I want to learn more about the time my great-great-grandfather spent onboard a British ship. Thomas Murrant was born in 1789 and was conscripted into Napoleon's army aged around 16. He was taken prisoner on a British man-o-war ship in Spanish Bay, Nova Scotia, Canada, where he jumped ship. Can you find the ship?

Pauline Collins

Searching Findmypast's 'Prisoners Of War 1715-1945' collection (www.snipca.com/52093), I found two references to a Thomas Morand (a variant of Murrant), who was 26 when he was captured by the British near Pamplona on 19 October, 1813. He was imprisoned on the ship hulk Sophia Frederica and discharged on 1 June 1814. Presumably he then made his way to Canada to start a new life. You'll find further information in the original records (ADM 369/408), which Findmypast has digitised.

Have a genealogy question for Judith? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search Roman Catholic registers

IIYAMA PROLITE XCB3494WQSN

SIMPLIFY YOUR WORKSPACE WITH THE INTEGRATED KVM SWITCH

The professional monitor **ProLite XCB3494WQSN** has a KVM switch and a USB-C docking station. This means multiple computers can be connected and operated with just one mouse and keyboard.

A huge work surface and numerous connection options ensure a tidy desk and eliminate the need for bulky multi-monitor setups.

Find your monitor at
www.iiyama.com

Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

VIRTUALISATION SOFTWARE

VirtualBox 7.1

www.snipca.com/52181

What you need: Windows 10 or 11, macOS or Linux

The safest way to try a different operating system is to run it in a virtual machine (VM), because you won't have to replace your current one. VirtualBox is our favourite free software for this purpose, but it can be intimidating if you're new to VMs.

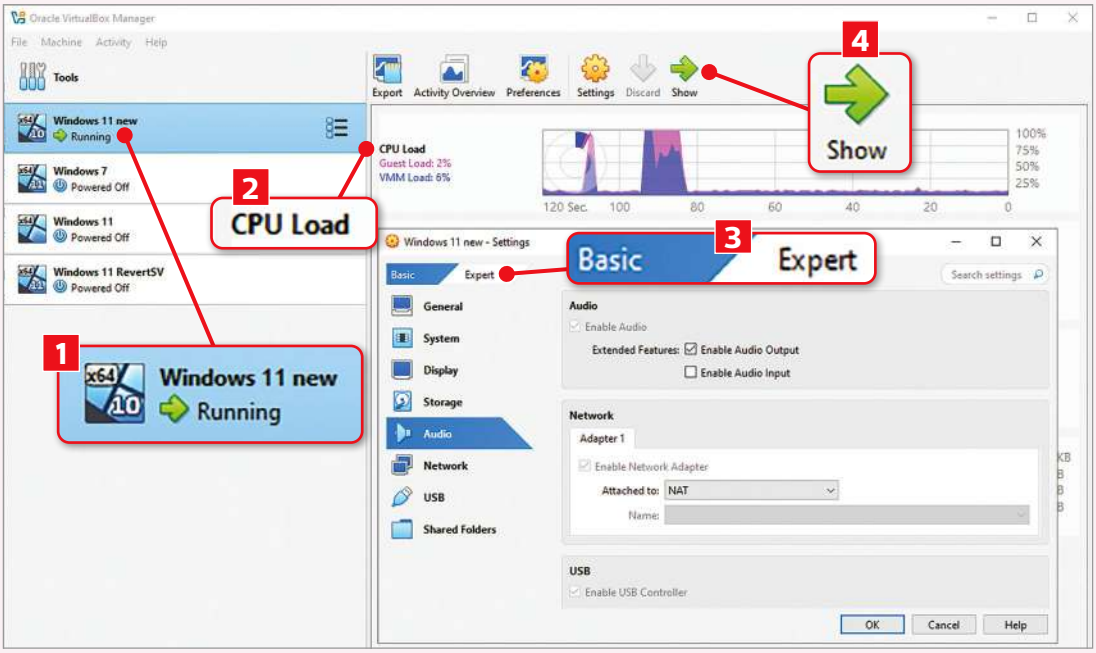
Version 7.1 makes the program friendlier to use, thanks to a redesigned interface that gives it a more modern feel. This includes larger buttons, clearer labelling of options and better use of colour to highlight settings.

Best of all, VirtualBox now lets you choose between Basic and Expert mode. The latter has extra functions for advanced users, such as disk encryption, hardware acceleration and configuring network adapters, while the former focuses on essential settings that are easier to understand.

To access these modes, first set up a virtual machine in VirtualBox using an ISO file for the operating system you want to use. Either click the Machine menu and select New or press Ctrl+N. Give the virtual machine a name, such as 'Windows 11', then browse to the ISO and follow the instructions.

Select the new VM in the left-hand panel and click Settings on the right. Here you can switch between Basic and Expert modes to configure your virtual machine. Basic options include the ability to tweak the amount of memory and number of processor cores available to the VM, enable audio and increase the size of the virtual monitor.

VirtualBox 7.1 also adds the ability to share a clipboard between the 'guest' PC (virtual machine) and the 'host' (your computer), so you can copy files from one to the other. You'll need to install the Guest Additions package for this, which adds extra drivers and functionality to your VM. Switch on the virtual machine, click the Devices menu and choose 'Insert Guest Additions CD image' to run the installer.



1 To add a virtual machine to VirtualBox, click the Machine menu, select New and locate the ISO file for the operating system. Double-click the name you've given your VM to power it on and launch the operating system in a new window.

2 You can track your virtual machine's CPU load, network speed and other activity information using colour-coded graphs. However, to monitor the VM's RAM usage, you need to install the Guest Additions package we mention above.

3 Click the Settings button to configure the active virtual machine's settings. VirtualBox now lets you choose between Basic and Expert mode, so you can hide advanced options until you're comfortable using the program.

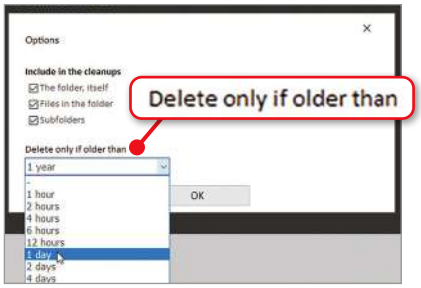
4 Click the Show button to switch from the main VirtualBox window to the one running your virtual machine. Press the right-hand Ctrl key + F to activate full-screen mode and make it feel like you're really using that operating system.

PRIVACY TOOL

PrivaZer 4.093

www.snipca.com/52182

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



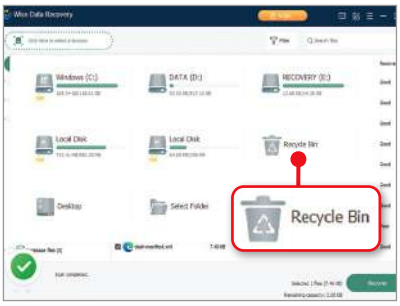
PrivaZer is one of the best free tools for removing traces of your PC activities, and is frequently updated with improvements. In the past few months, it has expanded its clean-ups to cover a host of additional software, including Proton VPN, FastStone Capture, AMD and Nvidia drivers, and Microsoft Store apps. You don't need to select these manually, because they're automatically included in PrivaZer's 'Software use' scans. The latest version introduces the useful ability to delete only folders that are older than a certain age when you perform clean-ups, so you don't lose important new items. Click 'Advanced options' on PrivaZer's home screen, then the Add button on the Include tab, and choose Folders. Select the folders to scan, click the 'Delete only if older than' menu (see screenshot) and choose an age – from one hour to one year.

FILE-RECOVERY TOOL

Wise Data Recovery 6.2

www.snipca.com/52186

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



Once you've emptied your recycle bin, its contents are generally gone for ever, which could mean losing any important files you sent there by mistake. Before you panic, try using the new Recycle Bin feature in Wise Data Recovery 6.2. This scans the bin for recently deleted items and lets you restore them to a folder of your choice. Click the 'Click here to select a location' button in the top-left corner of the program and choose the new Recycle Bin option (see screenshot). It will start scanning immediately, then display the results organised by file type - including graphic, video and office files. Select a deleted item, click Recover and choose a folder to save it to.

Note that the free version of Wise Data Recovery lets you rescue only 2GB of data. To recover an unlimited amount, you need to upgrade to the Pro edition for £36.

SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

TeraCopy Pro

www.snipca.com/52196

Price: $29.95 (£22.40) **Free trial period:** N/A

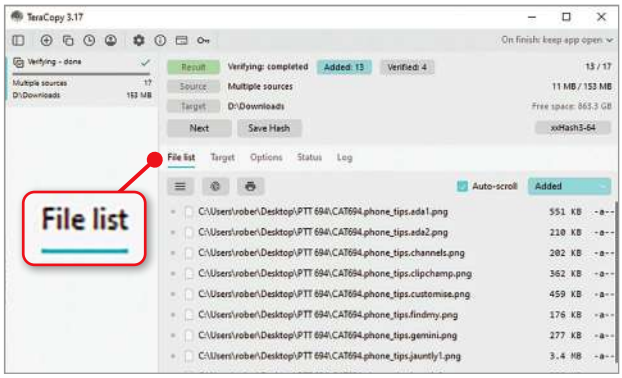
What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

TeraCopy has been around since 2007, launching shortly after Windows Vista. Back then, Windows Explorer (as it was then called) was notoriously slow at copying files between drives, partitions and even folders, and TeraCopy provided a speedier and more reliable alternative.

Nowadays, File Explorer is generally better at file transfers, but many tech experts still swear by TeraCopy and it's not hard to see why. It's incredibly fast at copying large amounts of data from one location to another – completing transfers while File Explorer would still be making you watch its progress graph.

Just add items to your file list (see screenshot), select the target drive or folder, then click Copy or Move – you can also access these options from your right-click menu. TeraCopy verifies that all the files have been transferred correctly, so you won't discover later that you can't open the photos you backed up to a USB stick, for example.

On the downside, the program's interface looks dated, with tiny toolbar options and text. The Pro version adds the useful option to save folders as favourites, so you don't need to select them manually each time, and the handy ability to edit your file lists, and ignore unnecessary items. However, you don't get much more for your money, other than permission to use TeraCopy in a 'commercial environment'.



OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

When you need to transfer a big batch of large files to an external drive, the free version of TeraCopy could save you a lot of time. But its Pro version is disappointingly short of extra features, and its old-fashioned design means it's easier just to drag, drop and wait using File Explorer.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

How can I make stop-motion videos?

Q Can you recommend software for creating stop-motion animation? I'm not looking to challenge Aardman studios – I just want to create some short films for my own amusement. I'm using a Canon PowerShot SX70 camera and a Dell Inspiron 5593 PC running Windows 11.

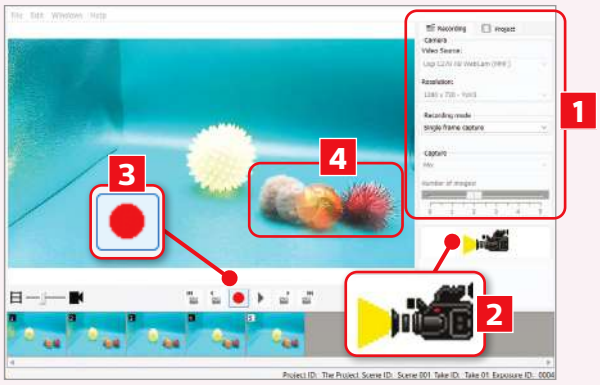
Erik Sorensen

A If you're looking to incorporate stop-motion animation into a more general-purpose camera-control tool (one that lets you set up the camera and control its positioning via a USB cable on your PC), try the free digiCamControl (www.snipca.com/52076).

But if you'd prefer something simpler, where you shoot a scene with your camera fixed in one position, then we recommend qStopMotion – also free from www.snipca.com/52077. Download the setup file and follow the prompts to install it. Make sure your camera is plugged in and switched on before you launch the program.

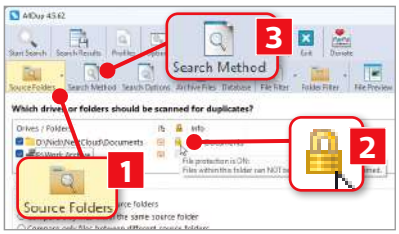
Click 'Create a new Project' when prompted, then click OK. Configure your camera using the controls on the right of the screen (1 in our screenshot), then click the camera button 2. Use the viewfinder on the left to set up your first shot, then click the red record button 3 or press the Spacebar to take your first shot, which will appear in the timeline at the bottom.

You can now set up your second shot – you'll notice a semi-transparent overlay of the previous shot is visible to help you plot your movements 4. Click record again, then continue framing and taking shots until your movie is complete. Regularly save your work in the File menu, then choose Export when you're finished to output it as an MP4 file to watch and share with others.



What's the best way to remove multiple duplicate files?

Q I was worried that my work wasn't being backed up to OneDrive, so I copied all the files from OneDrive to my PC. I thought this would overwrite the earlier-dated files, but this didn't happen. I now have multiple copies of my numerous Excel, Outlook and Word files. What's the best way to remove these duplicates?



Chris Parker

A Try the excellent AllDup (free from www.snipca.com/49056). Click 'Source Folders' (1 in our screenshot) to choose the folders to look in, then click the lock icon 2 to prevent files being deleted from a specific folder. Now select Search Method 3 and set it to 'Find duplicate files on the basis of their properties', making sure only 'File name' is ticked. Finally, click Start Search.

How can I add genealogy metadata?

Q Genealogy is my hobby, and I like to add basic tags and comments to my genealogy file properties. I see these as the digital equivalent of scribbles on the back of old photos. I'd like to find a program that lets me add some of this information into the file's metadata.

Jackson Eagleson

A You'll need a photo metadata editor, such as FastPhotoTagger. It lets you add captions, keywords for tagging and titles, as well as copyright and DateTimeOriginal (YYYY:MM:DD) information. To use it, you'll need to install both Java and ExifTool – see www.snipca.com/52071 for instructions. Once set up, click the folder icon (1 in our screenshot), then select a photo 2 and enter your metadata on the right. Now click any of the Change buttons 3, then the 'Write Changed Metadata to Photos' icon 4.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

ZipoApps injects ads into Simple Mobile Tools

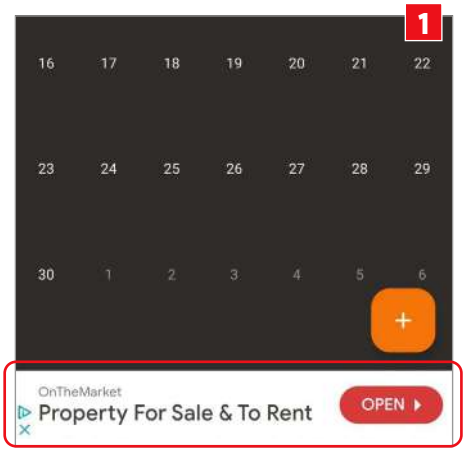
My heart often sinks when an independent software developer sells out to a bigger firm. I don't blame them for profiting from their work, but it rarely results in their tools improving. Indeed, it usually means they end up plastered with adverts and endless messages to upgrade as the new owners try to squeeze every penny from their new purchase.

That's precisely what's happened with Simple Mobile Tools (SMT), a set of superbly useful Android apps made by Slovakian developer Tibor Kaput. He summed them up perfectly as "simple, open-source Android apps without ads and unnecessary permissions, with customizable colours". These included calendars, cameras, file managers and music players – all designed with ingenious simplicity.

But it's all gone wrong since Israeli firm ZipoApps (www.zipoapps.com) bought the apps last December. The company tempts independent developers by claiming to "acquire the best apps and take them to the next level". Translated, that means adding trackers that blast you with personalised adverts. It has already done this with more than 50 apps, all available on the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/52159).

I saw this for myself when I opened Simple Calendar. The design hasn't changed much – it's still pleasingly clean, and you can try to pretend the ad at the bottom doesn't exist (see screenshot 1). But there was no ignoring the full-page ad that appeared when I clicked the Plus button to create a calendar entry 2. Nice house, but I'm not interested.

ZipoApps wants you to pay 99p a week to unlock premium editions of the apps, but a better idea is to download free forked versions of SMT under the Fossify brand: www.snipca.com/52160. Simples!



Simple Calendar's design is still pretty clean, despite the ad at the bottom...

...but try to create a calendar entry and the ad grows into a full page

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Huawei on its new triple-folding phone

www.snipca.com/52130

"Huawei Mate XT Ultimate Design inherits the iconic symmetric Star diamond design seen on previous Ultimate Design devices. The phone's shimmering surface was produced by an intricate sinusoidal cutting process, and its eonic curves on each cutting surface give the body a distinctive look."

WHAT THEY MEAN

If we don't make this phone sound absurd, how can we change more than £2,000?

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

William 'Shaggy' Edwards

Online influencers aren't the only people addicted to taking selfies – criminals can't stop themselves either. Drug dealer William Edwards – nicknamed Shaggy due to his resemblance to the *Scooby Doo* character – was caught by police after he shared photos of himself swigging beer on the encrypted messaging service EncroChat.

Edwards, 29 from Liverpool, flogged cannabis and cocaine across Merseyside in 2020. Officers also found heroin in his home, and £17,000 in cash.

Detective Inspector James Boardman said that "like many drug suppliers before him, Edwards helpfully provided a great deal of evidence on which we were able to build the case". He's now serving 16 years behind bars, where opportunities for selfies are likely to be limited.

MINI PC | **£365** from GMKtec www.snipca.com/52068

GMKtec NUCbox M6

Open and shut case

Our current favourite mini PC – the Geekom A8 (£899 from www.snipca.com/51157, see page 32) – is a great choice if you want cutting-edge performance levels and are willing to pay for them. GMKtec's NUCbox M6, on the other hand, will appeal if you can live with lesser specifications and have a tighter budget.

> "Strikes a sensible balance between price, performance and upgradability"

All versions of the M6 are built around an AMD Ryzen 5 6600H processor, which is older and less powerful than the A8's AMD Ryzen 9 8945HS chip. The M6 version we're looking at here also halves the A8's RAM (to 32GB) and storage (to 1TB). If you wanted to save even more money, you may be tempted by the version with 16GB RAM and 512GB storage for £236.

There's also a barebones £190 model that comes without RAM and storage, should you want to supply your own. But if you don't already own compatible components, you're better off letting GMKtec kit it out for you.

While the processor is a couple of generations old, the Ryzen 5 6600H still offers a decent level of performance. In benchmark tests that compare raw performance, it ran at around 70 per cent of the speed of the A8, which given the price difference is an impressive result. The comparison drops to around 60 per cent when running graphics-intensive tasks, but even this is surprisingly good.

This means the M6 runs general office software, web browsing and email tasks well. In particular, standard office programs load quickly and large documents are handled with ease. The M6 also handles image editing in Photoshop well, though it slows down if you start adding too many layers and effects. Gaming might sometimes be a stretch, but it'll be fine with less-demanding titles, with their graphical details turned down.

There's nothing remarkable about the design. It's housed in a simple black plastic case, which won't win any awards but looks fine and feels fairly robust. On the front you'll find one USB-C and two USB 3.0 ports, along with a socket for wired headphones. On the back there's two more USB 3.0, two Ethernet, an HDMI and one DisplayPort. It also has Wi-Fi 6E built in.

If you'd prefer the cheaper 16GB/512GB version now and upgrade at a later date, getting inside the case is straightforward, with the top cover simply clipped in place. Removing this reveals the fan cover, which is secured with four screws. Once this is removed, the SSD and RAM slots are easily accessible. The design includes dual SSD options, with the primary SSD featuring a heatsink that allows for an additional SSD if needed. Each slot supports up to 2TB, enabling a total of 4TB of internal storage.

However, we'd recommend buying sufficient components from the start to ensure they all work together and save you hassle in the future.

SPECIFICATIONS

Six-core AMD Ryzen 5 6600H processor • 32GB RAM • AMD Radeon 660M graphics • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.2 • 2x 2.5Gigabit Ethernet port • 1x HDMI port • 1x DisplayPort • 1x USB-C port • 3x USB 3 ports • Windows 11 Home • 52x129x127mm (HxWxD) • 528g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/52068

VERDICT A sensible choice that handles general Windows and basic image-editing tasks well

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 £899
Our current favourite mini PC is more than twice the price, but offers lots of RAM and storage, and a more powerful chip

LAPTOP | **£1,099** from HP www.snipca.com/52075

HP OmniBook X 14

Tip TOPS

Those of us with longer memories might recognise HP's OmniBook brand, but this is the first HP laptop to carry the name since 2002. It's also HP's first to be built around Qualcomm's Snapdragon X Elite AI processor. This means it's part of Microsoft's Copilot+ range of computers (see www.snipca.com/52094), with its TOPS exceeding the minimum of 40 set by Microsoft (see page 62).

This is only the second laptop we've reviewed with this chip – following the Asus Vivobook S15 reviewed in Issue 688 (£999 from www.snipca.com/51051) – so it's worth repeating how these processors differ from rivals.

> "A Copilot+ machine with a decent screen and long battery life"

The X Elite uses its own ARM architecture rather than the more familiar x86 architecture of Intel and AMD chips. This means it works best with software specifically designed for ARM processors, but does provide a special emulation mode that lets you run most x86-based software.

As with the Vivobook S15, performance is slick and speedy in apps built to run on the ARM architecture, and more than good enough in apps running under emulation, provided they actually work (some notable exceptions include Adobe InDesign and Illustrator at the time of writing). However, it struggled with more demanding 3D software, including games.

It also lags behind our current favourite laptop, the Dell Inspiron 14 Plus (£699 from www.snipca.com/51831, see page 30). The difference here is only a couple of per cent, but as the Inspiron costs around £400 less, it starts to look like much better value for money. In graphics tests, the X 14 ran at around half the speed of the Inspiron.

Another area where the X 14 falls slightly short is its 14in IPS screen. On the plus side, the 2240x1400-pixel resolution gives you ample clarity and detail at this screen size, and colour reproduction is reasonably good. It's capable of showing 99.9 per cent of the sRGB colour standard and 81 per cent of DCI-P3. However, its maximum brightness level of only 300cd/m² pales compared to some rivals.

But battery life is phenomenal, lasting 19 hours 27 minutes in our video-playback test – the best we've ever seen. And the speakers sound surprisingly rich and powerful, while the webcam output is also impressive.

The case is slim, so connections are few and far between – with just two USB-C, a single USB 3.0 port and a headphone jack (pictured below).

SPECIFICATIONS

Twelve-core Qualcomm Snapdragon X Elite processor • 45 TOPS • 16GB RAM • Qualcomm Adreno graphics • 14in 2240x1400-pixel IPS touchscreen • 1TB SSD • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB 3.0 port • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.3 • Windows 11 Home • 14.4x313x224mm (HxWxD) • 1.34kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/52075

RIGHT EDGE

LEFT EDGE

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *Maximum PC*, *PC Pro* and *T3*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

Computer act!ve BUY IT! ★★★★★ We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Computer act!ve RECOMMENDED ★★★★ Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT A slim and sophisticated PC, but it's pricey for what it offers

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus £699 A better-value laptop with similar Windows performance for a lot less

PORTABLE MONITOR | **£234** from Ballicom www.snipca.com/52092

Lenovo ThinkVision M14t Gen 2

Move the resolution

Traditional monitors tend to be something of a fixture on your desk, because they have large stands and need to be plugged into a wall socket. If you're looking for something more portable, either as a second screen for a laptop or something you can stash away when you've finished working, then the Lenovo ThinkVision M14t Gen 2 is well worth considering.

> "An extra screen that offers more room to work wherever you go"

It has a 14in touchscreen, so similar in size to the panel on a small laptop. It uses IPS technology and has a built-in foldaway stand that can be orientated in landscape or portrait mode. Much like a tablet, if rotated it will automatically detect its orientation and change the screen appropriately.

The hinge that holds the screen upright can be lifted to provide additional height, making it an incredibly versatile piece of kit and letting you adjust the angle of the screen when your source of light changes. It's encased in smart black plastic and has a premium feel.

For those who enjoy drawing on screen, it can be laid flat for a more comfortable experience. Included are a stylus and carrying case (which conveniently includes a pen holder). The stylus is a simple device, though, and lacks any buttons, so it won't match some of the more sophisticated drawing tablets out there.

The screen has a resolution of 2240x1400 pixels and an aspect ratio of 16:10, so is better suited to viewing web pages and working on documents than viewing films and TV series.

Screen quality is impressive. In our tests it reproduced a perfect 100 per cent of the sRGB colour standard and hit a decent maximum brightness level of 300cd/m². The screen has a maximum refresh rate of 60Hz and a response time of six milliseconds, which is quite slow. You won't notice this when editing a document, but it won't feel silky smooth when scrolling and isn't ideally suited to playing fast-moving games. Text and still images are crisp and clear, though, making it ideal as a second screen.

Before you rush out and buy it, you need to ensure that the devices you want to connect to it have a particular type of USB-C port. There are two USB-C ports on the device, one on each side, and either can be used to power the device and send video to it. However, the USB-C port you connect from must be able to carry a DisplayPort signal, so check the specifications of your laptop or other connected device before committing to the ThinkVision. There's no HDMI port, so you can't opt for that as an alternative.

If you have a laptop that can pass on sufficient power, you should be able to use the screen simply by connecting it to the laptop's USB-C port. You can also use it with screens that *don't* carry enough power, such as a phone or tablet, but you'll need to connect the second USB port to the mains.

Alongside the ports, there are several buttons and controls along the edges (pictured below left). On the left there's a brightness switch and a menu button. The power button is on the right edge. The placement of these buttons makes navigating the on-screen interface straightforward.

At £234, this is expensive for such a small screen and costs a tad more than our current favourite standard monitor, the 27in BenQ BL2790QT (£230 from www.snipca.com/52050, see page 32), despite being half the size. What you don't get with such a large monitor is the option of stashing it away when you've finished or taking it with you.

SPECIFICATIONS

14in IPS screen • 2240x1400-pixel resolution • 16:10 aspect ratio • 60Hz refresh rate • 6ms response time • 2x USB-C ports (DisplayPort compatible) • 224x315x97mm (HxWxD) • 700g • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/52092

VERDICT A useful second screen you can carry with you wherever you go and simply pack away when not in use

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE

Asus ZenScreen MQ16AH £449 A more expensive portable OLED screen that's slightly larger at 16in but only has a 1080p resolution

SMARTPHONE | **£479** from OnePlus www.snipca.com/52131

OnePlus Nord 4

Rains supreme

The OnePlus Nord 4 has a striking all-metal case that makes it look more expensive than it is. At just 8mm thick, this smooth, slim device slips comfortably into a pocket.

The 6.74in AMOLED screen goes right up to the edges of the phone, leaving very little bezel. The picture is sharp, crisp and bright enough to view comfortably indoors and out, with a 120Hz refresh rate that makes scrolling feel smooth. OnePlus has also applied its AquaTouch technology – typically reserved for its more expensive phones – so you can use it even when the screen is wet. This is backed up by the phone's IP65 weather-proof rating, which means you can safely use it in a rainstorm.

> "Slim and stylish, with slick performance and good battery life"

The Nord 4 is available in three colours and two configurations – select the one you want using the options to the right of the photo on the website. The version with 12GB RAM and 256GB storage costs £429, while 16GB and 512GB costs £479. We think the higher-capacity version is worth the extra £50.

We were impressed by how the phone's new Qualcomm Snapdragon 7+ Gen 3 chip fared in our tests. Games ran smoothly, as long as we avoided the very highest detail settings. The phone feels quick in general use, too, and should stay that way for a while, with OnePlus promising system updates through to Android 18 and security updates for six more years.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 7+ Gen 3 processor • 12GB or 16GB RAM • 256GB or 512GB storage • 6.74in 120Hz 2772x1240-pixel AMOLED screen • 50-megapixel rear camera • 8-megapixel ultrawide camera • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Android 14 with OxygenOS 14.1 • 163x75x8mm (HxWxD) • 200g • One-year warranty • www.snipca.com/52131

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

Although the Nord 4 supports 100W fast charging, which can power up its 5500mAh battery in around 30 minutes, the phone comes without a charger, so to hit those speeds you'll need to buy your own. You can get one for around £40, such as this Anker model from www.snipca.com/52133.

The phone's battery was fantastic in our tests, easily making it through a full day of regular use with 40 per cent to spare. By reducing our screen time, we eked two days of use out of a full charge.

The phone's main camera takes reasonable photos, and OnePlus's software can enhance them, but it's nothing special.

VERDICT A mid-range phone that looks and feels luxurious and should last for years to come

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a £349 It doesn't have the same smart design, but we still like it and its reasonable price

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

PCIe

What does it do?

PCIe stands for Peripheral Component Interconnect Express, and it's a type of interface on a PC's motherboard that lets you add internal components. This could be something basic like a Wi-Fi card, or a more sophisticated component such as a graphics card, which requires the fastest possible interface your PC can provide.

How does it work?

Your PC's motherboard, like the MSI B550 Gaming Gen3 (pictured), will have a selection of PCIe expansion slots. These come in several sizes because different types of expansion card require a different number of connections. Graphics cards use larger PCIe x16 slots because they need 16 times as many connections as PCIe x1 slots – meaning graphics cards can process more data all at once.

What are the specs?

As well as having different numbers of connections, PCIe slots come in several versions. Most recent PCs come with PCIe 4.0 slots, which have been around for over five years. The specification of any device you buy should mention which PCIe version it requires, but if your PC is an older model, it's worth double checking its compatibility. You'll find this information in the manual for your motherboard. You can use a PCIe 3.0 card in a PCIe 4.0 slot, because the slots are backwardly compatible. However, you can't put a PCIe 4.0 card into a PCIe 3.0 slot.

Can I change it later?

To upgrade your PCIe slots, you'll need to replace your motherboard and processor. PC-building enthusiasts might relish the challenge but most people would be better off buying a new computer.

PORTABLE SSD | **£86** from Amazon www.snipca.com/52113

Netac US91TB

Store away

The Netac US9 is basically a USB stick, albeit an extremely fast, high-capacity SSD version. Indeed, this is an outstanding portable storage drive when it comes to features and performance.

The design is stylish yet functional, with a casing made entirely of metal. It weighs heavy in the hand which suggests it's robust enough to withstand the odd drop or knock.

The covers at either end conceal two types of connector – USB-C and USB 3.0. This makes it compatible with a wide range of devices, including PCs, laptops, phones and tablets. It comes formatted in exFAT and works straight away in Windows, macOS, Android and iOS.

The covers that flip up and down over the top of the connectors (as pictured below) are held in place using small magnets to keep them safe when you're carrying the drive around. Simply flip the lid back, plug it in, and you can access the drive's capacity through your device's file manager.

Once connected, we found the performance was exceptional. It offers lightning-fast transfer speeds, which make it a useful way of boosting your device's storage. Our benchmark tests registered read speeds of up to 1050MB/s and write speeds up to 1030MB/s. With these speeds you could use them to store video files, for example, and edit them straight on there, rather than having to upload them to the PC's SSD first. That said, using the drive for long periods for heavy workloads isn't recommended, but it excels at short-term tasks.

The US9 comes in a range of capacities. Besides the 1TB model (£86), there are 512GB (£53) and 256GB (£37) versions if you'd rather spend less.

Unlike some other drives, there is no software included, so setting up the file format and whatever software you use on the drive is entirely down to you. There are also no software or hardware security options, so you'll need to use your operating system's own encryption tools, or install some yourself, if you want to keep the drive's contents safe.

SPECIFICATIONS
Available in 1TB, 512GB and 256GB capacities • USB-C and USB 3.0 connectors • 1000MB/s rated read speed • 950MB/s rated write speed • No software included • 20x90x120mm (HxWxD) • 50g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/52113

VERDICT A very fast portable USB drive that uses SSD technology to achieve its high read and write speeds

★★★★½

ALTERNATIVE Lexar SL500 External SSD 1TB £91 Not as portable and a tad more expensive, but this external SSD is even faster

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

What's the best printer for occasional use?

Q I used to have an Epson printer, but I don't print very often so the ink kept drying up and clogging the print head. I switched to an HP DeskJet model, with a combined print head and cartridge, so the whole lot is replaced when changing ink. I'm now ready to replace that printer, but I don't want another HP because I don't want an ink subscription. Do inkjet printers still get blocked if they're not used regularly?

Graham Gibb

A Unfortunately, most inkjet printers are prone to getting clogged up if they aren't used at regular intervals. You could still opt for an HP DeskJet model, which are cheaper and come with tri-colour cartridges. These still use cartridges with the print head attached. And there's nothing stopping you from opting out of the ink subscription service. The HP DeskJet 4220e (£50 from www.snipca.com/52116) is worth considering.

Your other option is a laser printer that uses toner cartridges rather than ink. This is a lot less likely to stop working if rarely used. If you're fine with mono printing, we'd recommend the Brother HL-L2445DW (£149 from www.snipca.com/52117, pictured).

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Meticulous design and performance

Vand water-cooled PC

Industry-leading water cooled PC, redefining your gaming experience, delivering a harmonious blend of timeless aesthetic and unparalleled performance.

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KEYBOARD | **£148** from Amazon www.snipca.com/52104

Corsair K65 Plus

A light touch

At £148 this keyboard sits at the upper end of what most people are likely to pay for a mechanical model, especially one that doesn't have a number pad. However, it is wireless and is among the best keyboards we've ever used.

While it lacks a number pad, it still has the standard arrow keys as well as Page Up, Page Down and Home buttons. There's also a media button, in the form of a multi-function control dial in the upper-right corner.

The keys have a soft feel and concave caps that makes them comfortable and easy to type on – a bit like pushing into a firm pillow. We were able to get the desired results with very light presses, so there's no need for a heavy hand. And each press is stable, with no wiggle in the switches, just a firm up-and-down motion that feels luxurious and well made. It's quiet, too, so you won't disturb people around you with the sort of clatter you can get from some mechanical models.

In terms of connectivity it has just about everything you could ask for. There's a wireless USB dongle, as well as standard USB connectivity for wired use and charging. There are also three Bluetooth connections, so you can pair it with up to three devices at a time and use hotkeys (mapped to those Home, Page Up and Page Down buttons) to switch between each one.

Because the keyboard is also aimed at gamers, there's RGB lighting that you can customise, including the option to switch it off entirely if you prefer.

SPECIFICATIONS
75-per-cent keyboard layout • Corsair MLX Red switches • 1000Hz polling rate • Programmable keys • 266-hour battery life (with RGB lights off) • 35x320x136mm (HxWxD) • 918g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/52104

VERDICT A luxurious but expensive keyboard that's a dream to type on, as long as you can live without a number pad

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE MSI Vigor GK50 Elite £80 A cheaper mechanical keyboard complete with a number pad, but it's wired

SPEAKER | **£39** from Amazon www.snipca.com/52105

JBL Go 4

Sound that carries

The JBL Go 4 is the modern-day equivalent of that small, portable transistor radio you may have carried around with you years ago while you worked in the garden or that you took on holiday. These days, of course, your smartphone can stream just about any radio station and music you like, so this palm-sized and reasonably priced speaker is intended to improve on the sound quality of your phone's speaker.

The Go 4 stands just 70mm high and has a high-quality fabric finish available in a range of colours. The construction is sturdy, so it can absorb a few knocks and won't suffer if exposed to water and dirt, thanks to its IP67 rating.

Setting up and managing the speaker can be done though the JBL Portable app, which is easy to use. It's also where you'll find a bunch of extras that we weren't expecting, such as the option to link two Go 4 speakers to create stereo output.

There's also a tool that lets you adjust the sound quality to squeeze a little extra out of the battery when it's getting low, though it should last for seven hours without it.

Sound quality is brilliant for the size, with taut, robust bass tones that anchor the lower end; mid-range textures come through without becoming lost; while the higher frequencies are never grating.

This is a brilliant little device though it can't quite match the Tribit StormBox Micro 2 (£60 from www.snipca.com/45329, reviewed in Issue 654), which has even better sound quality and remains our favourite mini speaker.

SPECIFICATIONS
4.2Watt speaker • Bluetooth 5.3 • 7-hour battery life • USB-C charging port • IP67 rating protection • 78x94x42mm (HxWxD) • 190g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/52105

VERDICT An affordable and surprisingly powerful mini speaker you can take anywhere

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Tribit StormBox Micro 2 £60 Has better sound quality in a case that's almost as small, though it's around £20 more

VIDEO DOORBELL | **£150** from Doro www.snipca.com/52155

Doro Hemma Doorbell

Home comfort

You may recognise the Doro brand from its range of phones, which are designed for older people who find modern smartphones unnecessarily confusing. The Doro Hemma Doorbell is the company's take on video doorbells, making them perfect for those who don't want all the confusing features and options found on other smart doorbells.

It comes with both a sticker and a wall mount that you can screw in next to your front door, so you can have it up and running in 10 minutes. It also includes a USB-C cable for recharging, which is necessary after about 10 days of use, and a Doro Hemma Chime, which plugs into a power socket and produces a loud ring.

> "An excellent and simple smart doorbell with no hidden costs"

The 1080p camera can send a live feed to its app (available for iOS and Android devices), alert you remotely when someone presses the doorbell and even send a notification if it detects movement. It also has night vision, so you get a clear view of your doorstep even if it's dark outside. If you insert an SD card (not included), you can set it to record video, and unlike other cameras you won't need to pay a subscription for the privilege.

Also useful is the 'Assist' function, which diverts the video feed to a friend or relative, so they can deal with a stranger at the door if needed. There's also a Siren button in the app that generates a loud noise from the doorbell, alerting anyone nearby if you need help or feel unsafe.

Overall it's a great starting point if you're new to smart home appliances or you're trying to fit one for someone who isn't particularly tech savvy. It's not expensive for what you get, especially as there are no hidden costs or subscriptions. Tech enthusiasts may find that it lacks features, but that's the point. This is a stripped-down smart doorbell that's easy to use and can offer you and your loved ones peace of mind.

SPECIFICATIONS
1080p video resolution • Rechargeable battery (via USB-C port) • 150-degree field of view • Requires 2.5GHz Wi-Fi • 154x49x32mm (HxWxD) • Two-year warranty • www.snipca.com/52155

VERDICT A good video doorbell that requires little technical knowledge and can offer security and peace of mind for you and your family

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Eufy Security Video Doorbell E340 £152 A more sophisticated video doorbell with added features, making it a better option for tech-savvy users

DO I REALLY NEED...

A tri-fold smartphone?

What is it?

The Huawei Mate XT is a folding smartphone with two hinges in the screen. When folded, it's a 6.4in smartphone. However, when you unfold the device it opens out to reveal a large 10.2in screen, which is similar in size to a standard iPad.

What does it do?

It works as either a smartphone or a tablet, or something in between if you don't want to open it out completely.

What's the catch?

Smartphones with just a single fold are very expensive, and it looks as if this one will be even more so. Currently Huawei is only launching the device in China, where it's set to cost the Chinese yuan equivalent of around £2,135.

So can I do without it?

Yes. For that kind of money you could buy an exceptional smartphone and a tablet, and still have plenty of change.

NEXT ISSUE

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iPhone 16
Apple's latest smartphone starts at £799 – find out if it's worth buying

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Buy It

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Dell Inspiron 14 Plus
£699 from www.snipca.com/51831
Tested Issue 683

This laptop has the same processor (Intel Core Ultra 7 155H) as our previous favourite (Acer Swift Go 4), but manages to squeeze more speed out of it. It also comes with 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Excellent value overall.

ALTERNATIVE Acer Swift Go 14 Still a fast and powerful laptop, with a great 14in screen. £1,099 from www.snipca.com/49733

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £656 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 10.9in
£320 from www.snipca.com/51839
Tested Issue 646

The price of the 10th-generation iPad, released in 2022, has fallen far enough to make it better value than earlier models. If the Amazon price above has expired, get it for £349 on Apple's site.

ALTERNATIVE iPad Mini With an even better, but smaller, screen than the 10.9in iPad, the Mini also supports the Pencil and has 64GB of storage. £499 from www.snipca.com/33050

ANDROID TABLET

Samsung Galaxy Tab S9
£799 from www.snipca.com/50039
Tested Issue 667

With a much brighter screen than our previous favourite – the Galaxy Tab S8 – this is perfect for watching TV. It also has a faster processor, so tasks feel smoother, even with several windows open. £799 will get you the 128GB version. If you want 256GB you'll need to spend around £100 more.

ALTERNATIVE Lenovo Tab P11 Pro It's slower than the Tab S9 and the screen is duller, but has a detachable keyboard so you can use it as a laptop. £400 from www.snipca.com/45244

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 13
£499 from www.snipca.com/52048
Tested Issue 627

Now £300 cheaper than its 2021 launch price, the iPhone 13 has a superb screen, long battery life and an excellent camera – particularly for taking quick snaps without blurring. But it might be soon be replaced as our top choice by the new iPhone 16s.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone SE With a single camera and smaller screen but the same powerful A15 processor and 64GB storage as the iPhone 14, it's great value. £429 from www.snipca.com/34773

ANDROID PHONE

PRICE DROP

Google Pixel 7a
£349 from www.snipca.com/46332
Tested Issue 660

A cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, this uses AI to add clarity to photos, and lasts an impressive 10 hours. Has a fast processor and 8GB RAM to supercharge performance.

ALTERNATIVE Nothing Phone 2a Don't be put off by the odd name. This has a distinctive design, superb camera and decent battery life. From a UK company too. £329 from www.snipca.com/49930

Advertisement

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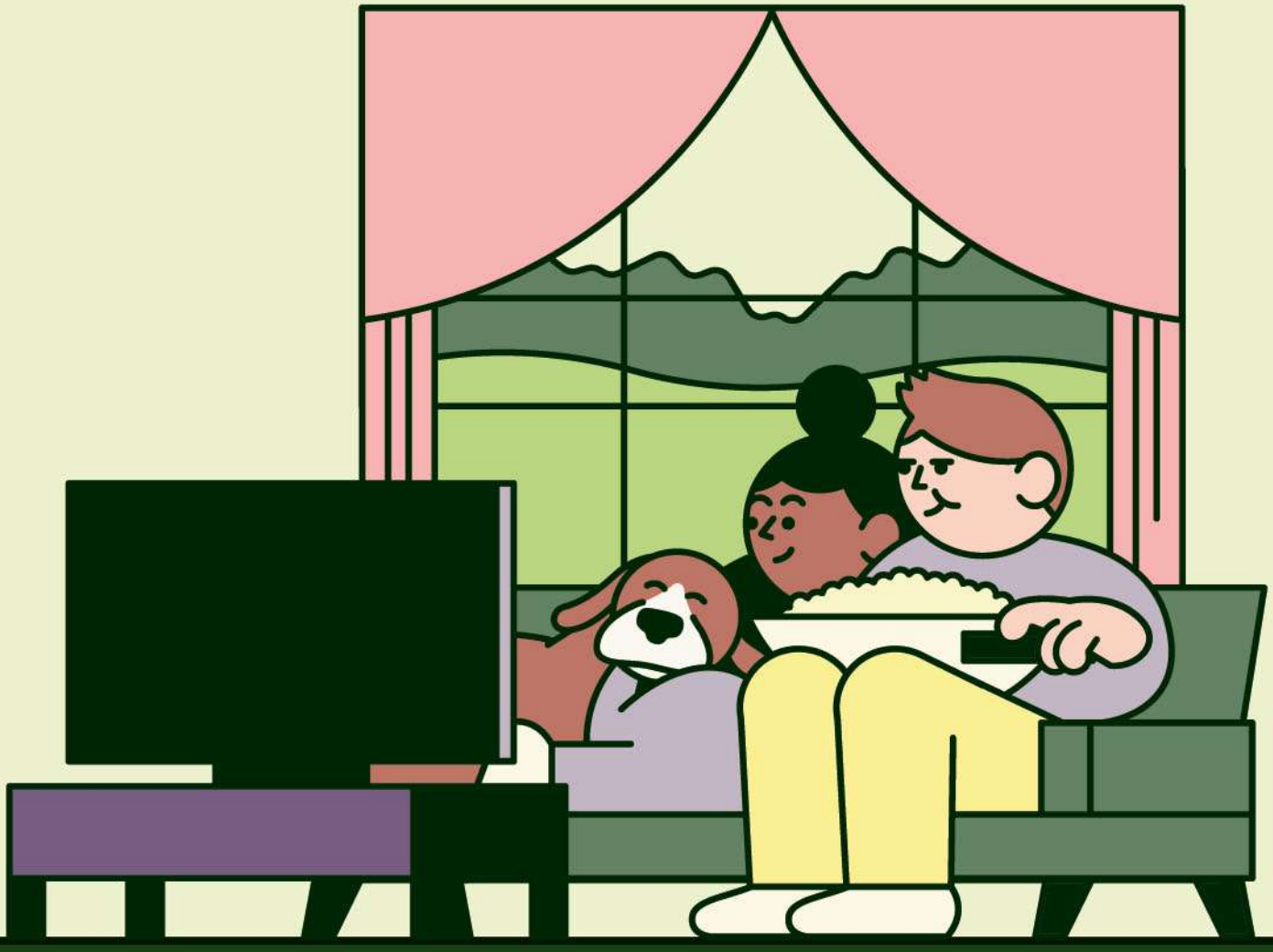

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Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

Geekom A8
£899 from www.snipca.com/51157
Tested Issue 689

This tiny machine (37x112x112mm) doesn't have much room for ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD, a fast processor and an SD card slot for adding storage. It comes with 32GB RAM, as does a slightly slower model that's around £170 cheaper and has only a 1TB SSD. Take your pick.

ALTERNATIVE Beelink SER8 A decent mini PC with 1TB SSD and 32GB RAM, but it's bigger than average. £629 from www.snipca.com/51331

EBOOK READER

Kobo Libra Colour
£199 from www.snipca.com/50192
Tested Issue 683

Kobo's first colour e-reader, with an E-Ink Kaleido 3 screen that supports 4,096 tones, making illustrations and photos leap out at you. You can also make notes using a stylus, though that costs £70 extra. It has 32GB storage and Bluetooth for playing audiobooks.

ALTERNATIVE Amazon Kindle This low-cost option is a good choice, especially now it has 16GB of storage. £85 from www.snipca.com/52049

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Premium
£19.99 from www.snipca.com/33247
Tested Issue 629

Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm NortonLifeLock, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a 10-device, two-year licence. Other versions are available, including Norton 360 for Gamers.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £29.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£58 from www.snipca.com/50751
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £38 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

NEW ENTRY

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£200 from www.snipca.com/51687
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £260 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 500GB
£71 from www.snipca.com/41547
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £93; 2TB costs £184.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £44 from www.snipca.com/37304

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 2... Philips 27E1N1600AE PC monitors

Winner of a Buy It award in Issue 692 (page 24), Philips' 27E1N1600AE is our new favourite PC monitor. It's made to keep you connected. With features like USB-C 3.2 with power delivery, you can charge your linked devices and work seamlessly, all with one cable.

It has crystal-clear images, with Quad HD 2560x1440 pixels. Utilising high-performance panels with a high-density pixel count, enabled by high bandwidth sources like USB-C, Displayport and HDMI, these new displays will make your images and graphics come alive.

Its High Dynamic Range delivers astonishing brightness, incomparable contrast and captivating colour, while the IPS panel gives you extra-wide viewing angles of 178/178 degrees, making it possible to view the display from almost any angle.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/52120 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 22 October. Good luck!

PHILIPS

You can buy the **Philips 27E1N1600AE monitor** for £199.99 from www.snipca.com/51687. For information on more Philips products, including TVs, speakers, soundbars and headphones, visit www.philips.co.uk.

PRINTER

Epson EcoTank ET-2830
£180 from www.snipca.com/51715
Tested Issue 676

This replaces the ET-1810 as our favourite printer because it adds copying and scanning to its functions for only £20 more. Print quality is great, especially for photos, which have crisp details, vivid colours and realistic skin tones.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £160 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

NEW ENTRY

Amazon Fire TV 50in Omni QLED
£490 from www.snipca.com/51020
Tested Issue 694

A fantastic 50in QLED screen with 4K resolution that produces vibrant tones in bright, sunlit images and pale, subtle shades in more atmospheric scenes. It provides access to all the streaming services you need, and offers voice control through Alexa.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Q60B
Excellent colour reproduction in well-lit scenes and the picture is wonderfully sharp, especially in 4K. £490 from www.snipca.com/51020

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£225 from www.snipca.com/47586
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £212 from www.snipca.com/52051

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Workshops & Tips

Pull Out & Keep
Issue 694

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HOW TO...

Make audiobooks from online videos

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: VLC Media Player **Time required:** 20 minutes plus processing time

YouTube, Vimeo and other video-streaming sites are brilliant resources for learning new skills and picking up interesting facts. They are also packed with content that's purely entertaining, engrossing and hard to ignore. If there's a downside to these services, it's that there's simply *too much* good content for any of us to sit down and watch in our spare time.

However, with some videos it's more important that you can listen to them rather than watch the footage, such as with comedians' stand-up shows,

book-review discussions, lectures and celebrity or political interviews.

Here, we'll show you how to extract the audio track from online videos so you can listen to them them while getting on with something else.

1 Download your video

If you don't already have the video you want to work with saved on your computer, you first need to download it. The method for doing so varies between sites. On YouTube, go to the relevant video, and click the Download button below the playback window (see screenshot below).

Click this button to download YouTube videos to your PC

However, to do so you'll need to sign up to YouTube Premium. This costs £12.99 a month after your one-month free trial and also removes adverts from the videos you stream. If you often use YouTube to listen to music on your phone, there's another benefit of Premium. If your phone goes to sleep or you switch to another app while YouTube is playing, the music is paused, which can be annoying if you're listening while doing something else. With YouTube Premium you don't have this problem because the stream will continue to play in the background.

There's also a family plan at £19.99 a month for one individual plus up to five family members in the same household, and a student plan at £7.99 a month, which requires annual verification that the user is still a student.

Thankfully, there are free alternatives.

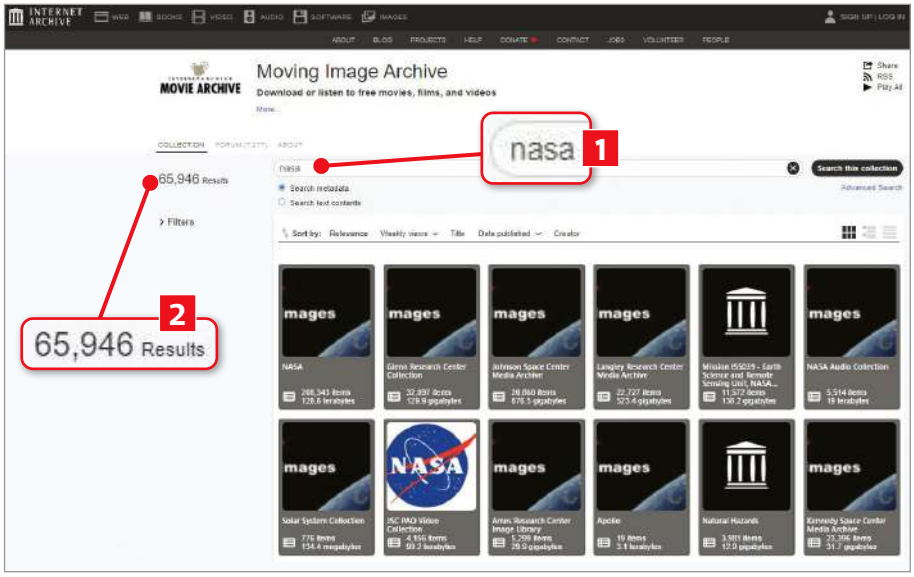
Click 'Paste Link' to download non-copyrighted YouTube videos using 4K Video Downloader

You can use 4K Video Downloader (www.snipca.com/45349) to download 10 non-copyrighted videos for free every day. Simply copy the URL of a YouTube video and click the Paste Link button (see screenshot above). Next, select the quality, format and whether to include subtitles, then click Download.

Another option is to look beyond YouTube and download videos from the

Internet Archive, which includes some great historical documentaries. Visit www.archive.org and click Video at the top of the screen, followed by All Video under the Featured heading. You can then browse the catalogue of almost 13 million videos, or use the search box. Our search for 'Nasa' (1 in our screenshot right) turned up nearly 66,000 videos 2, including the first episode in a series on the history of space travel (www.snipca.com/52101), which we'll be using to create our audiobook.

Whatever you choose to download, it makes sense to do so at the highest quality possible. So, if you're offered several options, it's a good idea to download the largest file size as this will often have the least compression applied to it. It will probably also have the highest video resolution although that's not important for this purpose as we're only interested in the audio.



We found nearly 66,000 videos related to Nasa on the Internet Archive

2 Extract the soundtrack

Now that you've downloaded your video, you need to extract the soundtrack. There are several ways you can do this without spending any money, but we'd recommend using VLC Media Player, because it's incredibly versatile and can be used for to play a wide range of audio and video formats once you've finished creating your audiobook.

If you don't already have it on your machine, download it from www.snipca.com/52010. Once installed, launch the program and press Ctrl+R. Now click Add and select the video file you just downloaded.

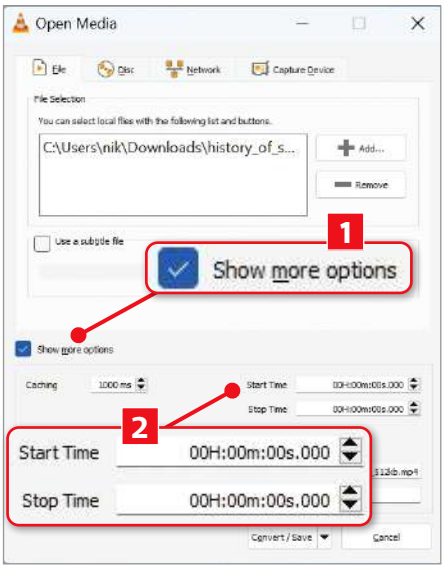
By default, VLC Media Player will convert the whole video to an audio file, which you can then trim using Audacity (free from www.audacityteam.org). However, if you know that the first or final few seconds/minutes are silent or irrelevant, you don't have to include them – saving you an editing task later. To do this in VLC, tick 'Show more options' (1 in our screenshot below left), and set the Start Time and Stop Time 2.

When you're ready to convert the file, click 'Convert/Save' and VLC will ask how you want to save it. Make sure Convert is selected in the Settings box, then select one of the 'Audio' options in the Profile menu.

If you read Issue 693's How To on setting up an MP3 player for use in your car, you'll know that your choice of audio file type can have a bearing on the size of the resulting file. Here, we've selected MP3 in the Profile dropdown menu (see screenshot below left) because it should give us a faithful conversion of the original file without taking up an excessive amount of storage space.

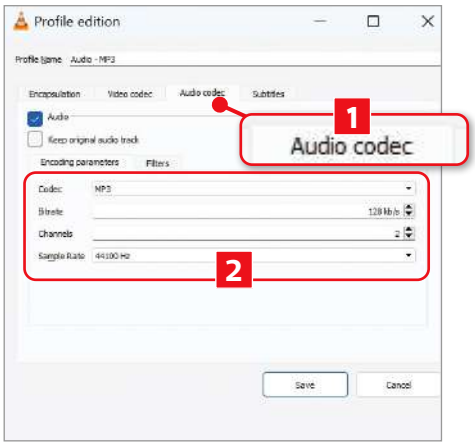
By default, the MP3 option outputs a file with two audio channels (for left and right, to create a stereo audiobook), encoded at a bitrate of 128kbps, with a sample rate of 44.1kHz. If you want to tweak these settings, click the spanner icon, then open the 'Audio codec' tab (1 in our screenshot below) and choose new values in the dropdown menus 2.

The default settings are equivalent to CD quality, and while you don't need to know what the measurements mean to successfully convert a video to an audio file, it's a good idea to understand these values if you intend to convert different types of audio in future.



If you don't want to convert the entire soundtrack, set start and end points in VLC

Use the MP3 setting to strike a sensible balance between file size and audio quality



VLC's default settings produce CD-quality conversions, but you can change them

Sample rate

The sample rate is the number of times the audio stream is 'sampled' from the original file then written to the output file. If our sample rate was 1Hz, we would take a measurement once every second, then stretch out the tone sampled at that precise moment to fill the whole second before writing it to your drive.

In a one-minute audio file the tone would only change 60 times, which would be far too little to sound like recognisable speech. If we sampled the audio track at 1kHz, we would grab 1,000 samples per second. So, the tone in the output file would update 60,000 times a minute, which would result in more recognisable speech.

At the default setting of 44.1kHz, VLC is sampling the source file 44,100 times a second. As a result the tone in the output file would change 2.646 million times a minute for a very high fidelity result.

As you might imagine, you won't be able to detect that many changes with the naked ear, so you could reduce the sample rate by clicking the Sample Rate menu and selecting lower-value option. This would also reduce the size of the resulting file. Reducing it too much may reduce audio quality in your captured track, but this is less of a factor when extracting speech rather than music.

Bitrate

Bitrate, meanwhile, refers to the amount of data used to represent each sample in the audio file. This is easier to explain using the example of photos rather than audio.

Imagine you were trying to recreate a photo using only five paints that you're not allowed to mix: red, blue and yellow, plus white and black. You could probably produce a fairly crude approximation of the scene you were looking at, but the result would be unsatisfying.

Now imagine you had an unlimited palette, with subtle shades between each of those primary colours, and the ability to mix as much of the white and black as you wanted to create shadows and highlights. The amount of 'data' in the picture – the colours – would be far higher than in the original, even if the canvas size hasn't changed.

How does this relate to bitrate? Let's say each of the 44,100 audio samples we record every second (because our sample rate is 44.1kHz), is a tiny audio canvas. We can choose how much data to store on that canvas for each of the 44,100 samples recorded every second. This amount of data is the bitrate. The higher the bitrate, the more data we're recording for each sample, the more faithful to the original and the larger the output file will be.

Channels

Two channels is the default in VLC and records a stereo file, with one channel going to the left speaker or earphone and one to the right (assuming there are two channels in the original file). Choose one channel in your settings, and each speaker/earphone will get the same output. The benefit is a smaller resulting file. If your audiobook is only going to contain speech, using just one channel is unlikely to make much of a difference.

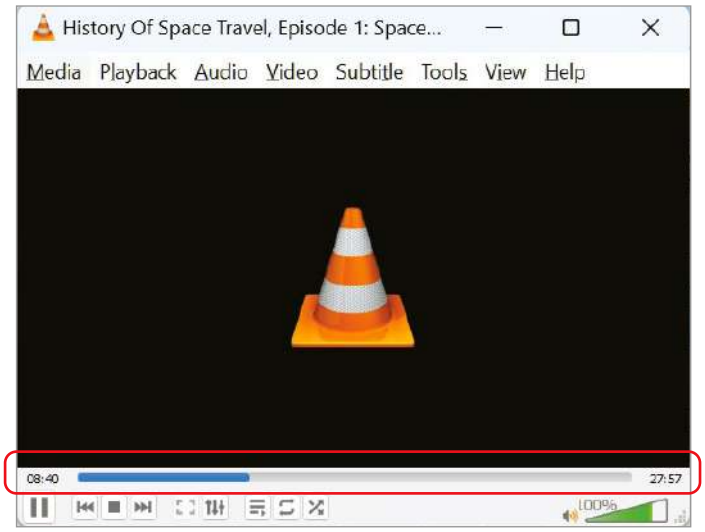
Ultimately, if you want to make any changes to the default settings, we'd recommend creating a few test recordings so you can get a feel for the output before creating your audiobook. We're going to leave our settings as they are, and would only choose anything lower than the defaults if the device on which we were going to listen to the resulting file was low on space.

How I listen to audiobooks

I listen to far too many podcasts, which reduces the amount of time I can spend listening to audiobooks. When I do listen to them, I usually buy them from Audible. However, the method outlined here is an effective way to work your way through online videos you've been planning to enjoy, as not all videos need the accompanying pictures to make sense.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you listen to audiobooks?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk



Keep an eye on the playback progress bar to see when VLC will finish converting your audio track

3 Save your file and check it's converted properly

If you opened the additional settings to change the sample rate, bitrate and so on, click Save and you'll return to the Convert box.

Click 'Browse' and choose a location for your saved output file, then click Start. VLC will now extract the audio track from the video and save it to your computer's hard drive. You can keep an eye on the progress bar at the bottom of the playback window (see screenshot left). Don't worry that you don't see the video images playing because they won't be included in your audiobook.

Once the conversion has completed, check that it plays back properly. It makes sense to do this in an alternative media player if you have one. If you do, close VLC and open Media Player, which is built into Windows. If you've previously uninstalled it, you can reinstall it from the Microsoft Store at www.snipca.com/52013.

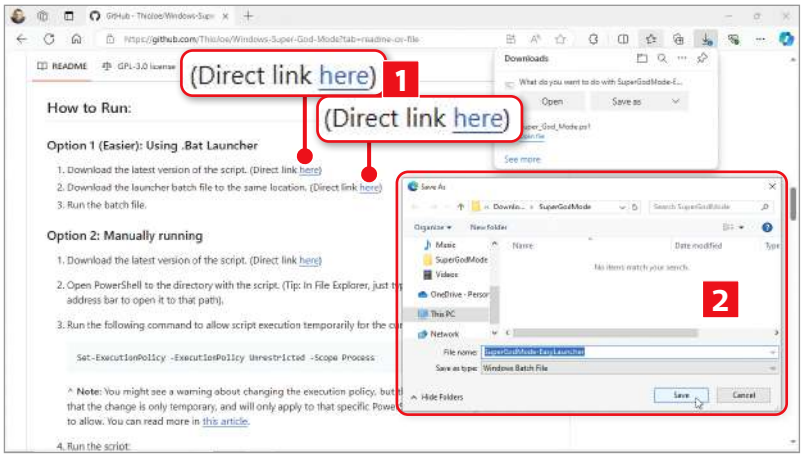
Create your own Super God Mode shortcuts folder

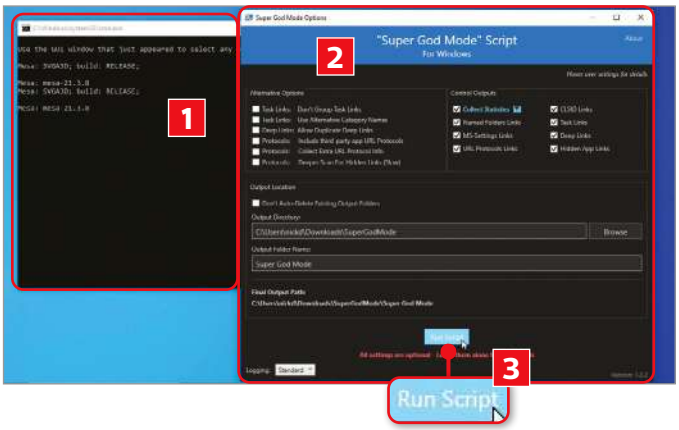
What you need: Super God Mode (works in Windows 10 and 11)
Time required: 10 minutes

Windows God Mode has been one of the operating system's best-kept secrets for years. Simply create a folder, name it GodMode.{ED7BA470-8E54-465E-825C-99712043E01C} (copy and paste from www.snipca.com/52174), open it and you'll see 200 shortcuts to various system settings, which you can drag to your desktop for easier access.

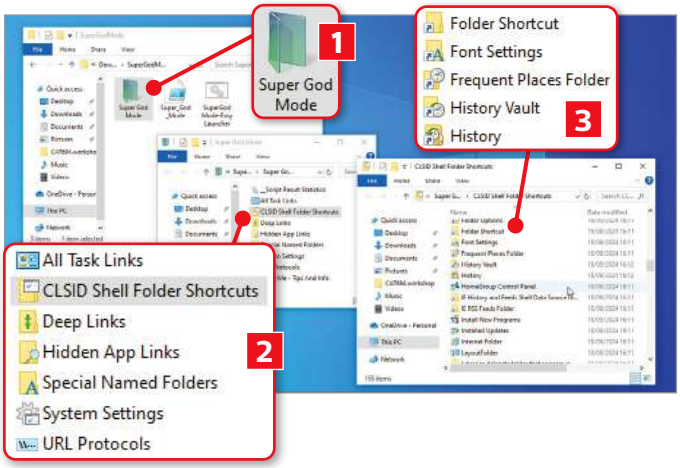
That may sound impressive, but a new tool from an independent developer increases this to over 1,200. Called Super God Mode, it divides these shortcuts into seven categories. They provide one-click access to even more hidden system options, app settings, troubleshooters and more. Here, we'll explain how to create, customise and use this folder.

STEP 1 Super God Mode comprises two files: a command-line script that creates the shortcuts and an easy-to-use launcher that lets you configure the script and run it. To download the files, open the Super God Mode web page on GitHub (www.snipca.com/52112) and scroll down to the 'How to Run' section. Under the 'Option 1 (Easier): Using .Bat Launcher' heading, click the two blue links 1 in turn to save the script ('Super_God_Mode.ps1') and launcher ('SuperGodMode-EasyLauncher.bat') files to the same folder 2, which can be saved anywhere on your PC for easy access. Once both files are downloaded, open the folder and double-click the 'SuperGodMode-EasyLauncher.bat' file.

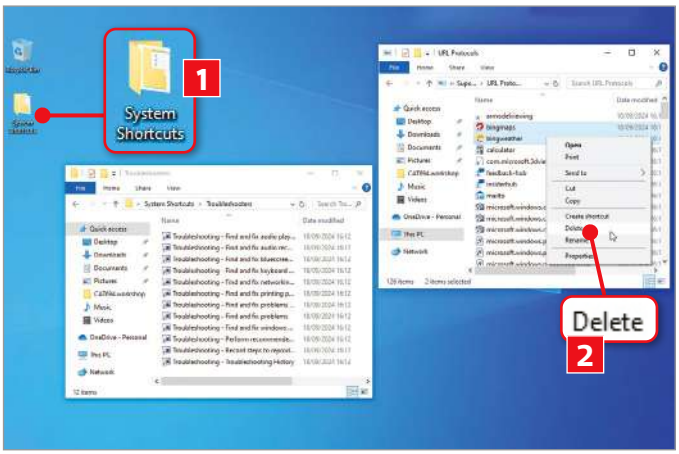




STEP 2 Two windows will then open: a Command Prompt pane 1 and the Super God Mode launcher 2. The launcher window contains options that let you choose which shortcuts you want to create. For now, we'll stick with the default settings to install the bulk of the available shortcuts. To do this, click the Run Script button 3. The launcher will now disappear, and the Command Prompt window will show a list of messages as it creates each shortcut in turn. This can take a few minutes. When the script finishes, it will display a summary. Press any key to close the window.

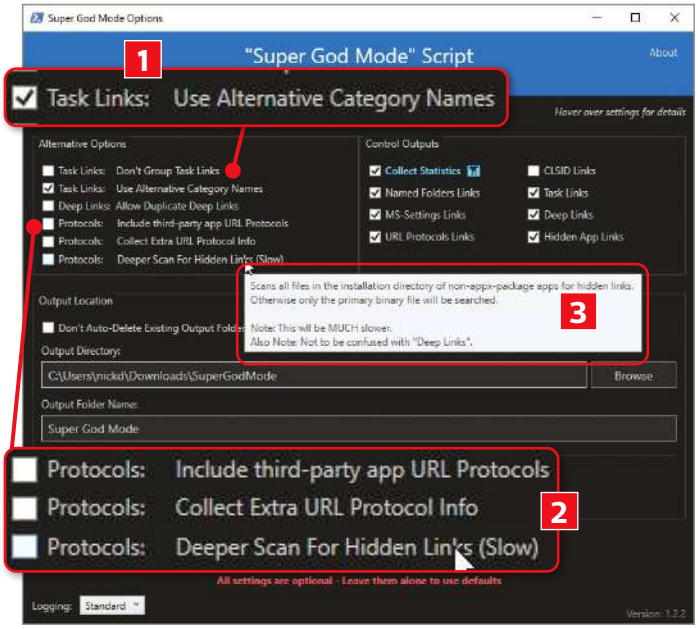


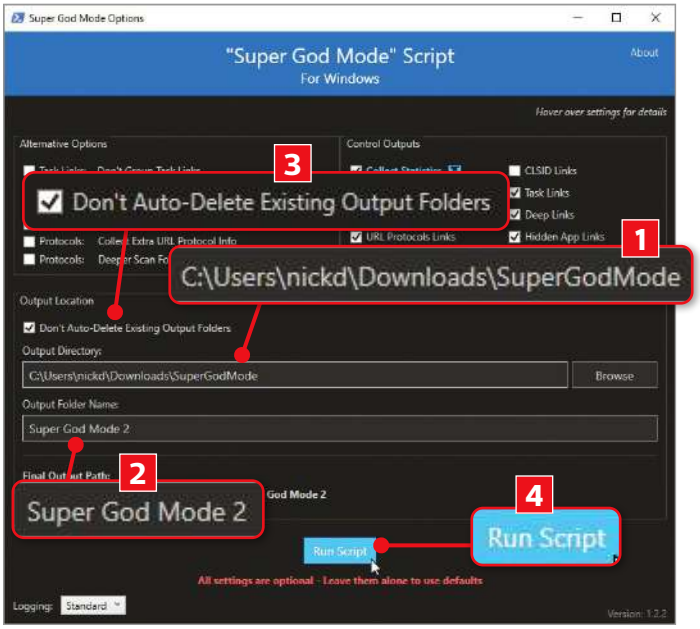
STEP 3 A new green Super God Mode folder 1 will appear in the folder containing the files you downloaded in Step 1. Open this to reveal seven category-based folders 2. Open these to access the list of shortcuts, each of which has a descriptive name and icon 3 to help you identify them. These shortcuts offer one-click access to hidden settings, Control Panel options, special folders and troubleshooters.



STEP 4 Double-click a shortcut to see where it takes you. Some shortcuts may generate errors – this just means the option doesn't exist on your system, so can be safely ignored. The shortcuts can be copied or moved like any other file on your hard drive, letting you reorganise them to suit your needs. For example, you may want to place frequently used shortcuts in an accessible location, such as on your desktop **1**. You can also copy them to a USB stick to use on other computers. There will be many shortcuts that you rarely – if ever – use. These can simply be ignored or deleted by right-clicking them and clicking Delete **2**.

STEP 5 If you'd like to start your folder from scratch or create a customised folder of shortcuts, double-click the 'SuperGodMode-EasyLauncher.bat' file to reopen the launcher. Now go to the Control Outputs **1** section. Here, you can choose which categories to include in your shortcuts and decide whether to exclude the Script Result Statistics folder, which just contains spreadsheet files that list all the shortcuts in each category. Hover your cursor over a category title to show a brief description of what it contains **2**. Untick a category to remove it from your new Super God Mode folder **3**.





STEP 6 The Alternative Options section lets you make further changes on a category-by-category basis. Tick 'Use Alternative Category Names' **1** to replace the existing task names with more logical titles. The 'Allow Duplicate Deep Links' option can be safely ignored. The final three options **2** allow you to add even more shortcuts to the URL Protocols and Hidden App Links categories. Again, roll your cursor over each one for a detailed description **3**. For example, ticking 'Include third-party URL protocols' scans non-Microsoft programs to see if they contain any shortcuts that can be added. Not all shortcuts will be useful (or even work), but some may prove to be valuable timesavers.

STEP 7 Use the Output Location options to choose where to save this version of your Super God Mode folder **1** and give it a different name (we've named ours Super God Mode 2 **2**). If you don't change either of these options, the original Super God Mode folder will be removed unless you tick 'Don't Auto-Delete Existing Output Folders' **3**. Once you've set things up to your satisfaction, click the Run Script button **4** again to produce a new folder of shortcuts. As before, once complete, double-click the shortcuts you've created to see where they go, then delete those that don't work or that you're unlikely to use.

Readers' Tips

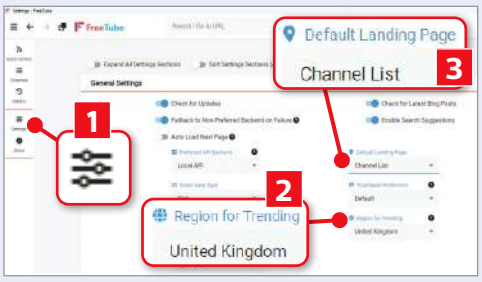
TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Change FreeTube's settings to personalise YouTube

FreeTube (www.snipca.com/51885), which you recommended in Issue 692 (page 18), is a little erratic and crashes every now and then, but it's still worth it to avoid the barrage of YouTube adverts. What I love is how many settings it gives you. It's like rebuilding YouTube from the ground up tailored to your tastes.

Opening the Settings menu is easy – you just click the icon on the left (1 in our screenshot). My two favourite sections are General Settings and Player Settings. In the former, you can change the 'Region for Trending' dropdown menu from the default US to United Kingdom 2. You can change the default page FreeTube opens on from Subscriptions to Channel List 3, History or Settings.

In 'Player Settings' you can change how long you want FreeTube to wait before playing another video. The default seems to be five seconds, but I prefer it to be shorter. There are also settings here for changing default volume and fast-forward/rewind intervals.



Gary Shannon

Gary wins a copy of our 2023 Back Issue CD

Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/48860

DEVICES

Use Yale's tamper siren to deter burglars

For the past few years, I've been using Yale's Keyless Connected smart lock (pictured right), which you recommended in Issue 693's feature on protecting your home (page 60). It's an excellent device and I've had no problems with it. As well as the benefits you explained, it has two features that make it a great purchase. First is the 80-decibel 'tamper' siren, which is activated if someone tries to remove or disable the lock. While not deafening, this is loud enough to make a burglar think twice.

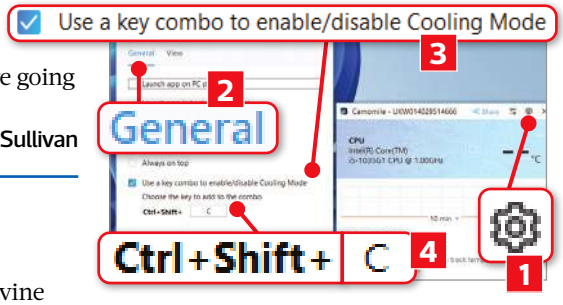
Second, for peace of mind, is that I can ask Amazon Alexa whether my front door is locked. I always do this upstairs as the last thing before going to bed.

Tony Sullivan

SOFTWARE

Change Camomile's keyboard shortcut

A big thank-you to Robert Irvine for introducing me to the laptop-cooling software Camomile (www.camomileapp.com, Issue 691, page 74). After failing to get to grips with similar tools in the past, this has been easy to use. I especially like how you can turn on its Cooling Mode with a keyboard shortcut. However, the default shortcut (Ctrl+Shift+Space) is one I use for a vital function in another program.



It's simple to change this though. Just click the settings cog (1 in our screenshot above), then General 2. Make sure the 'Use a key combo...' option is ticked 3 then type the key you want to use in combination with Ctrl+Shift. I chose 'C' for Camomile, making it Ctrl+Shift+C 4.

Carol Crawford

Why I stopped using...

A single-screen phone

After years of using a normal-sized phone, I was impressed when a friend showed me a folding phone at a recent party. I thought it would be an expensive gimmick, but it gives you a decent-sized screen for watching videos on.

And what I use instead...

My eyes watered when my friend told me his Samsung Galaxy Z Fold6 costs £1,799 brand new. I wondered if I could find an earlier model cheaper in a refurbished deal, and saw the **Galaxy Z Fold4** available for £417 on Back Markt (www.snipca.com/52091, pictured).

The Fold4 came out in 2022, so it's hardly ancient. When unfolded the screen is 7.6 inches, which is only slightly smaller than the iPad Mini. Resolution is clear enough that I don't need to squint, or hold it at a funny angle like some past phones I've had.

My biggest concern before buying was the hinge snapping, especially on a refurbished phone. But it's impressively robust. As long as you're not reckless, it'll last several years.

Darren Hough

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

APPS

Copy and paste translations in Microsoft Start

Like Frank Pearson ('Tip of the Fortnight', Issue 692) I also used the Translator app in Microsoft Start on holiday this summer. What's handy is that you can easily copy common phrases and paste them into a document file on your phone.

Do this by typing your phrase, then tapping the 'copy' icon next to the translation. This will show 'Copied' when done (1 in our screenshot below), and you'll see the phrase appear bottom left too 2. You can then paste it wherever you like, such as in Google Keep (www.snipca.com/52078), which I use on my Moto Android phone. It's easy to tap this to see the translations at a glance.

By the way, I urge all readers to install the Start app (Android www.snipca.com/51505; iOS www.snipca.com/51504). It's one of the best multi-purpose apps I've ever used.

Carl Horton

OFFICE

Jump to a specific page in Word documents

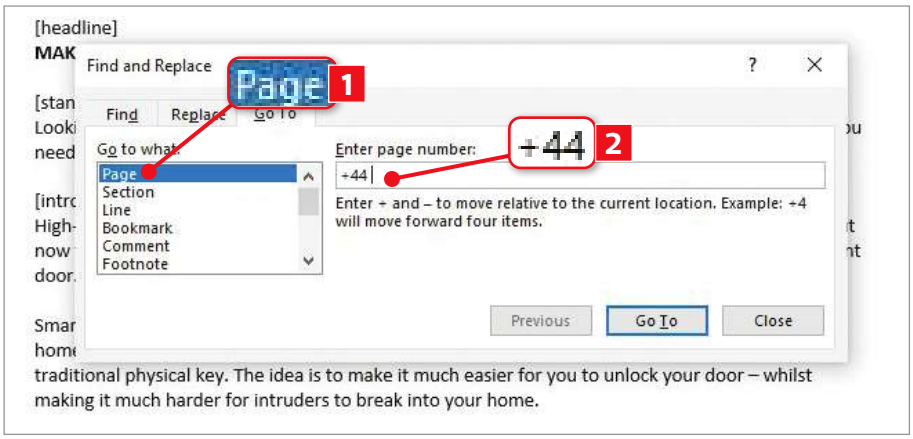
I loved your tip on typing \page in the 'Go To' tab of Word's 'Find and Replace' box to delete an entire page, including formatting (Issue 693, page 47). I use the Go To tab for another clever trick, which is jumping to a specific page. I find this easier on the wrist than scrolling with my mouse, particularly in a long document.

The best way to do this is to position your cursor on the document's first page. Now press Ctrl+G to open the 'Find and Replace' box and click the Go To tab. Make sure Page is selected on the left (1 in our screenshot below) and type the page you want to jump to.

For example, if I wanted to jump to page 45, I would type +44 2 and press Enter. The reason I type 44 and not 45 is because Word counts the first page as '1' – so you always have to type one number less than the page you want to go to.

It works in reverse too. Once on page 45, I can type -10 to go back to page 35.

Samuel Hunter



Reader recommends...

Honor Pad 9

£230 from www.snipca.com/49958

My priority when buying new tablets is battery life, so the 11-plus hours offered by the Honor Pad 9 (reviewed in Issue 682, page 25) got me interested. I also liked that the screen is bright, because I planned to use it outdoors a lot.

The clincher was that I found it for £230 – £20 cheaper than when you reviewed it. I bought it back in June, and used it throughout July and August while taking our campervan on treks across the south of England and northern France. Reading it outside as the sun set was bliss.

Battery life was as good as you claimed. If I fully charged it on Monday, I'd still be using this charge come Friday. This was for reading the news and downloaded books though, not power-sapping activities like playing games or watching TV. I have no idea how it compares to iPads, but it's the best Android tablet I've ever owned.

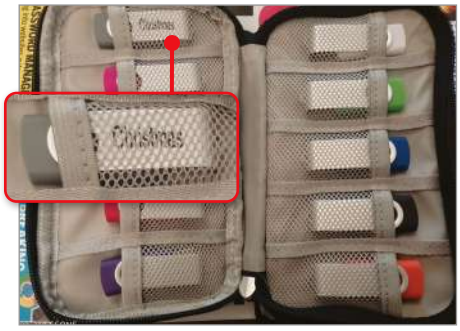
Paul Thornton

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

USB STICKS

Store sticks in a see-through bag

I bought a USB storage case just before I read Issue 691's Cover Feature ('Make your USB sticks last forever'). It wasn't the JBOS Storage Bag that you recommended (£8.99 from www.snipca.com/51676), but a £12.99 case from Lacdo (www.snipca.com/52072).



I wasn't keen on the JBOS bag because you can't see the contents of the sticks without removing them from the case first. The Lacdo bag has see-through mesh, which I prefer, and I'll use it to store my music collection in the car.

Look closely at my photo (above) and you'll see 'Christmas' printed on the top-left stick. I stick these labels on after printing them using my Brother P-Touch 1010 label printer (£14.99 from www.snipca.com/52074).

I always choose sticks with a flat side, making it easier to attach labels. I check their quality by loading a small music file on to each one, then retain a copy of the file on my computer as a backup. The most recent sticks I bought was this 10-pack of 16GB drives, for £29.99 (www.snipca.com/52073).

Chris Adam

Browser Tips

FIREFOX

Try experimental tools – including an AI chatbot

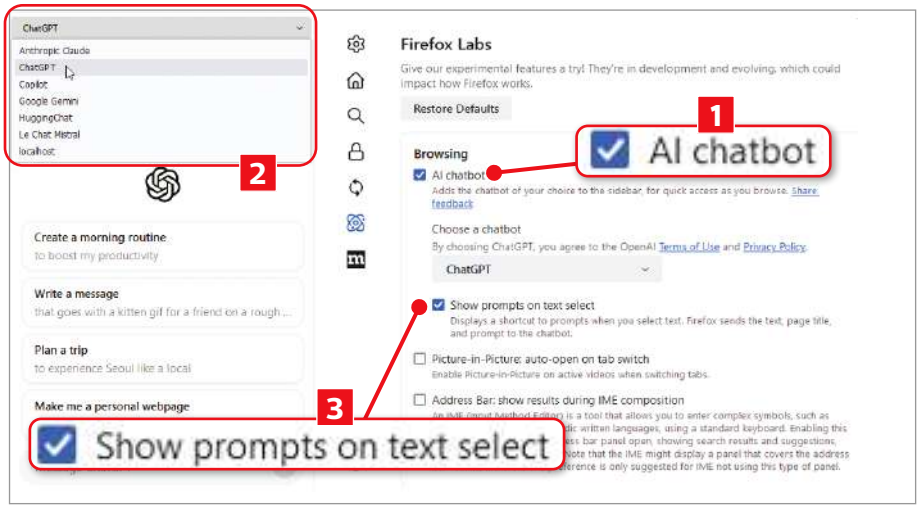
Firefox 130, released at the beginning of September, introduced a new feature called Labs. This lets you try experimental tools before they're officially added to the browser, without having to delve into its (rather confusing) 'about:config' preferences.

To access the new Firefox Labs section, click the browser's three-line menu button and choose Settings. You'll find it below Sync in the menu on the left.

The most interesting Labs experiment is currently 'AI chatbot', which brings Firefox in line with Edge, Brave and Opera by adding an AI-powered assistant to the browser. Tick the 'AI chatbot' box (1 in our screenshot below) to choose from five chatbot options, including ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Anthropic Claude.

A chat sidebar will then open on the left-hand side of the browser. Sign into (or up for) an account with the relevant AI service to start chatting. You can use ChatGPT and HuggingChat without signing in, and switch between chatbots using the dropdown menu at the top of the sidebar 2.

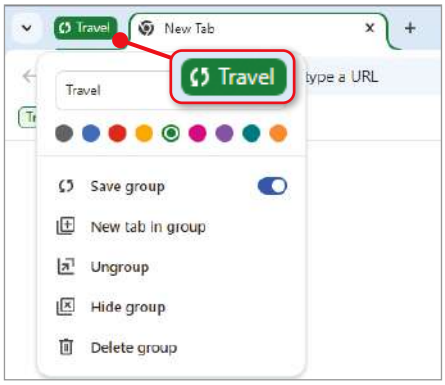
Tick the box 'Show prompts on text select' 3 to add a shortcut to your default chatbot to Firefox's right-click menu. You can then select and right-click text on a web page to get the AI assistant to summarise or simplify the content. The menu also includes a 'Quiz me' option, which – in a role-reversal – prompts the chatbot to ask *you* questions about the selected text.



CHROME

Sync groups of tabs across devices

Google has updated the 'tab groups' feature in Chrome to let you sync groups of tabs across all your desktop and mobile devices. This includes iPhones and iPads running the iOS version of the browser, which recently added tab groups.



The feature offers a convenient way to organise lots of open web pages into themed groups – such as Shopping, Recipes and Travel (see screenshot above) – to make them easier to manage. All the pages added to a group can be minimised to a single tab, which prevents Chrome's tab bar from becoming cluttered, and instantly reopened with a single click.

The new syncing option means that tab groups you create on your PC will be automatically available on your phone or tablet – and vice versa. This allows you to pick up where you left off, and add or remove pages to and from a group as required.

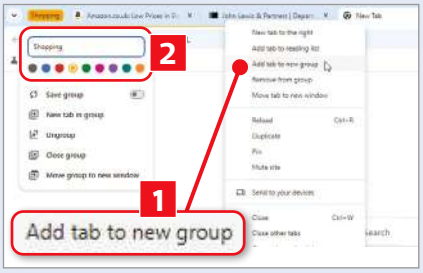
See our Workshop below to learn how to sync your tab groups across devices.

VIVALDI

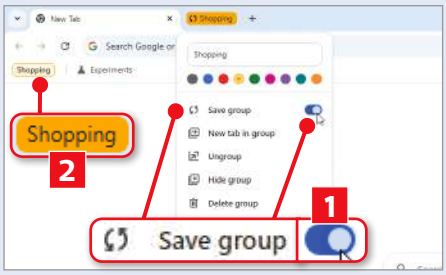
Drag files directly from the Downloads panel

One of the most useful new features in Vivaldi 6.9, released at the end of August, is the ability to drag and drop files from the Downloads side panel to

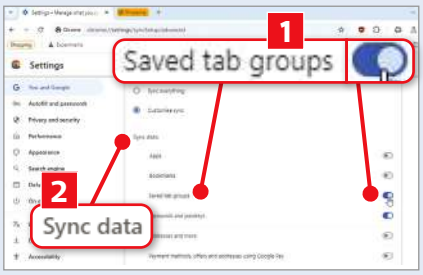
WORKSHOP Create and sync tab groups in Chrome



1 Right-click a tab in Chrome, choose 'Add tab to new group' 1 and give the group a suitable name and colour 2. Add further tabs to the group by right-clicking them and selecting 'Add tab to group' then the name of the relevant group.



2 To sync the tab group with Chrome on other devices, right-click its coloured tab and switch on the 'Save group' option 1. A syncing icon will then appear next to the name of the group, and a button will be added to your Bookmarks bar 2.

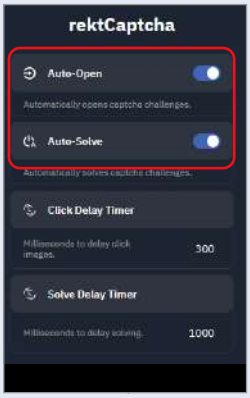


3 If synced groups don't appear in Chrome on other devices, you may need to tweak the browser's settings. Go to chrome://settings/syncSetup, click 'Manage what you sync' and ensure 'Saved tab groups' 1 is enabled under 'Sync data' 2.

BEST EXTENSION FOR... Solving image CAPTCHAs

rektCaptcha
Chromium www.snipca.com/52056

Although they're not as prevalent as they used to be, some websites still use image CAPTCHAs to make you prove you're not a robot. These usually involve clicking all the squares containing traffic lights, cars, street signs or other objects, and can be very irritating when you're trying to quickly sign into a site.



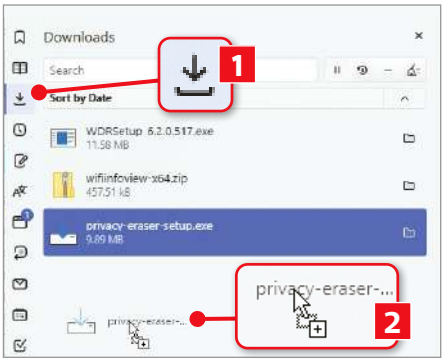
To skip this annoyance, install rektCaptcha, which automatically opens and solves CAPTCHA challenges by using an AI-powered image-classification model. Simply enable the extension's Auto-Open and Auto-Solve options (see screenshot), and you won't need to waste your time on identifying blurry images.

It even has a delay timer, to prevent CAPTCHAs from being solved so quickly they make sites suspect you're using an automated tool.

If you don't like that, try...

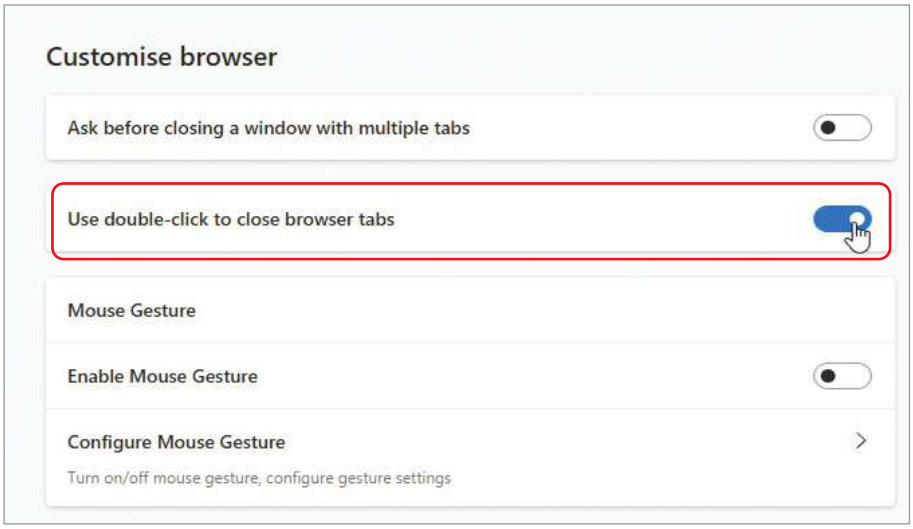
Buster
Chromium www.snipca.com/52057
Firefox www.snipca.com/52058

Buster switches image CAPTCHAs to audio challenges, then solves them using speech recognition. However, it's no longer as reliable as it used to be.



elsewhere on your PC. This saves you having to open your Downloads folder every time you want to retrieve a downloaded file, and means you can drag items directly to your desktop, specific folders, documents and even into emails.

To open the Downloads panel, either click the Downloads button in Vivaldi's left-hand sidebar (1 in our screenshot above) or press Ctrl+Shift+D. Click a file in the Downloads list and drag and drop it wherever you want 2. You can even select and drag multiple files at the same time. The original items remain in your Downloads folder.



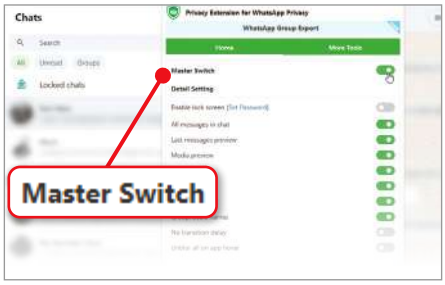
CHROMIUM

Protect your privacy in WhatsApp Web

The web-based version of WhatsApp (https://web.whatsapp.com) allows you to chat to people on the popular messaging app within the larger space of your desktop browser. The downside is that this makes your contacts and chats clearly visible to any nosy parker in the vicinity.

You can protect your privacy in WhatsApp Web by installing Privacy Extension for WhatsApp (www.snipca.com/52062). This unofficial new tool blurs names, profile pictures and conversations, so nobody can see who you're talking to or what you're saying. To unblur a message or contact, simply hover your cursor over the blurred area.

The extension lets you choose between blurring everything in the WhatsApp Web interface using the Master Switch (see screenshot below), or just specific details – click its toolbar button to select your preference. You may need to refresh the page to apply the initial blur. It operates entirely on your device, so doesn't collect or share any personal data.



EDGE

Close tabs faster by double-clicking them

The standard way to close a browser tab is to click the 'X' on its right-hand side. This can be fiddly when you have lots of tabs open because you need to move your cursor to the precise spot.

To make things easier, Edge gives you the option to close tabs by double-clicking any part of them, but the setting is disabled by default. To turn it on, click the three-dot menu in the top-right corner and choose Settings followed by Appearance. Scroll down to the 'Customise browser' section and switch on 'Use double-click to close browser tabs' (see screenshot above).

If you double-click and close a tab accidentally, you can reopen it by pressing Ctrl+Shift+T.

Phone and Tablet Tips

iOS

Customise your home screen in iOS 18

Apple has released the latest versions of its mobile operating systems, iOS 18 and iPadOS 18, to all compatible iPhones and iPads. If you haven't already installed the update, open the Settings app on your device and choose General then Software Update.

One of the most useful new features is the ability to customise the location and appearance of the apps on your Home screen. Unlike Android, which lets you place apps anywhere on your Home screen, iOS and iPadOS have traditionally forced them into a grid layout. Apple has now removed this restriction, so you can move the apps you use most often to prominent locations where they're easier to access.

Simply long-press your Home screen to make your app icons jiggle, then drag them to where you want them. They no longer need to be adjacent, so you can spread them out however you like – placing an important app in the bottom-right corner of the screen, for example. Tap Done to confirm the layout.

To change the colour of your app icons, long-press the Home screen and select Edit then Customise. Here you can choose between Light, Dark and Automatic – which switches between light and dark themes depending on the time of day.

A fourth option, Tinted (1 in screenshot left), lets you pick a colour from your Home screen's background to give app icons and widgets a matching tint. You can also change the size of your app icons from Small to Large 2, although this removes their text labels.

ANDROID

Find a lost phone – even if it's offline

Google has now rolled out its new Find My Device network in the UK, which lets you locate a lost or stolen Android phone even when it's offline. You should have received an email telling you that the feature has been enabled for your device, or soon will be.

Previously, Find My Device relied on your missing phone being connected to the internet, but now it can detect the phone using Bluetooth through other devices on the Find My Device network. This location data is encrypted using the PIN, pattern or password for your Android device, so only you can see it, and you'll also (anonymously) help other users find their lost phones.

To configure Find My Device, open the Settings app on your phone and select Google then 'All services'. Tap 'Find My Device' under 'Personal and device safety', ensure Use Find My Device is switched on and press the 'Find your offline devices' option.

You can choose to be part of Android's location network while you're in high-traffic areas such as airports, train stations and busy footpaths (1 in screenshot below), or in all areas you visit. Alternatively, choose 'Without network' 2 to look for your own phone but not assist other users.

To use Find My Device, visit the website in your desktop browser (www.snipca.com/52125) or install the app (www.snipca.com/52126) on another Android

BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Clipchamp

Free*

iOS www.snipca.com/52136

Microsoft has completely redesigned its Clipchamp app for iPhone and added a host of video-editing features. You can choose from hundreds of new templates, record your own voiceovers, add background music to clips, apply a range of effects, filters and transitions, and use AI to convert text into speech.

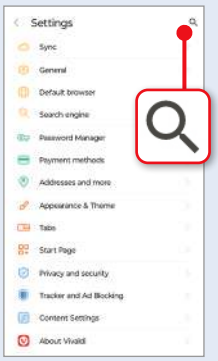
Vivaldi

Free

Android www.snipca.com/52138

iOS www.snipca.com/52139

Vivaldi has updated the Settings menu in its Android browser, making specific options easier to access. Related settings are now grouped into colour-coded categories and you can use the new search box to find them. Meanwhile, the iOS app has added 'X' icons to background tabs so you can close them with one tap.



Plex Photos

Free

Android www.snipca.com/52141

iOS www.snipca.com/52140

This new app from Plex lets you browse photos from personal libraries on your media server. Switch between curated recommendations from your collection, a Timeline view that shows pictures chronologically and a Library view of photo albums. Frustratingly, you can't upload content from your mobile device.

*Contains in-app purchases

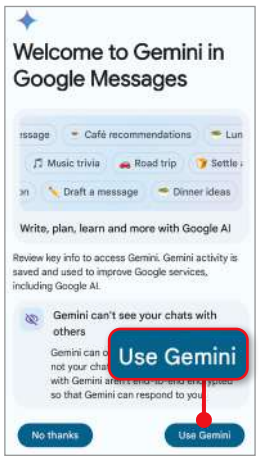
device. This shows your phone's location on a map, and gives you the option to make it play a sound, secure it by locking its screen and – in a worst-case scenario – factory-reset it to wipe its contents.

ANDROID

Chat to Google Gemini in the Messages app

You can now chat to Google's AI assistant, Gemini, directly in Android's Messages app (www.snipca.com/52134), because the feature is finally available in the UK. This saves you having to install the separate Gemini app (www.snipca.com/52135) and lets you interact with the chatbot as if you were talking to a real – if exceptionally knowledgeable – contact.

Tap the 'Start chat' button in the bottom-right corner of the Messages app and select Gemini at the top of the next screen. As long as you're comfortable with Google's privacy policy – Gemini can't see your conversations with other people, but stores details of your interactions and may share "relevant info" with other Google services – press Use Gemini (see screenshot above) to start chatting.



You can ask the chatbot to draft messages, generate ideas, look up information online, identify images and much more. To use Gemini, you'll need to enable RCS chats in the Messages app and have at least 6GB of RAM on your phone.

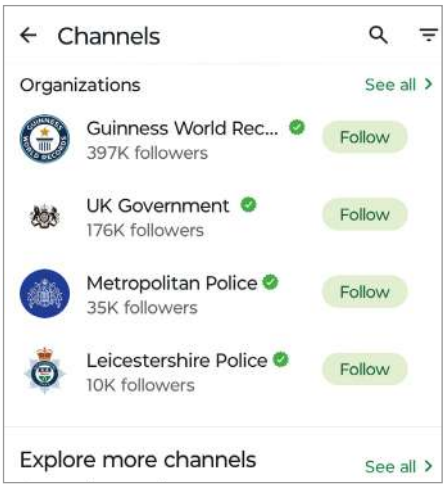
ANDROID & iOS

Explore channel categories in WhatsApp

WhatsApp has updated its Channels feature, which it introduced a year ago (see Issue 669, page 45) so you can follow companies and celebrities in the messaging app. Rather than present all available channels in one long list, WhatsApp has sensibly organised them into themed categories.

Tap the Updates tab at the bottom of the app to see recommended channels, then press 'Explore more' to browse the new categories. These include Entertainment, Sports, 'News & Information', Business and Organizations (see screenshot right), which spans everything from Guinness World Records to the UK Government and some local police forces.

Press the Follow button next to a channel to subscribe to that company or person's feed – or tap the channel's name to browse its content first. The channel will appear on your Updates tab, where you can see its latest messages, photos and videos. Although you can't reply to channel updates, you can react to them using emojis.



BEST APPS FOR... Autumn activities

Tree ID

Free
Android www.snipca.com/52143
iOS www.snipca.com/52144

Whether you're hunting for conkers or wondering where the leaves cluttering your driveway came from, this app from the Woodland Trust can help. It provides an A-Z guide to British trees, helps you identify different species from their leaves, bark and twigs, and shows a map of trees other users have reported in your area.
Best For Identifying autumn trees

Go Jauntly

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/52145
iOS www.snipca.com/52146

Go Jauntly suggests hundreds of walking routes around the UK, including suitably autumnal strolls. Its step-by-step instructions, photos and maps ensure you won't get lost, and though you need to pay for some features – including AI-powered walk generator Amble Anywhere – a monthly subscription costs just £3.99.
Best For Planning autumn walks

Ada

Free
Android www.snipca.com/52147
iOS www.snipca.com/52149

As we enter cold, flu and Covid season, many of us are already coughing and sneezing. Ada helps you diagnose your ailments by asking questions about your symptoms. It's not a substitute for a proper medical diagnosis, but Ada's reports and advice can be reassuring.
Best For: Diagnosing autumn ailments

*Contains in-app purchases

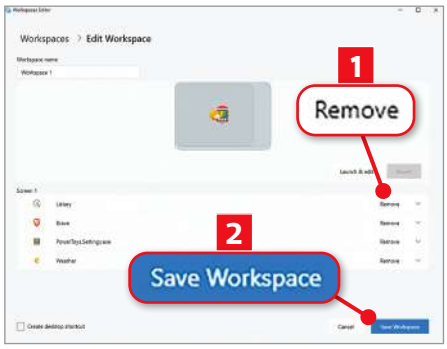
WINDOWS 10 & 11

Remove unwanted items from PowerToys workspaces

The best new tool in PowerToys 84.0, released in September, is Workspaces. This lets you save a set of programs, including browsers, in a layout of your choice, and launch them with a single click. It's great for saving specific groups of programs you need in different situations, such as at home and at work.

Open PowerToys then click Workspaces in the left menu and check that the Enable Workspaces slider is on (blue). Next, click 'Launch editor' if you want to create a workspace now, or do it later by pressing the keyboard shortcut Windows key+Ctrl+' (apostrophe). Click the top-right Create Workspace button, then launch and move programs to create your workspace. Click Capture when done, name it, then click Save Workspace.

Once you've finished, click Launch and Windows will open the programs in that workspace. If you need to remove any programs from a workspace, click the top-right three-dot button then Edit. Now click Remove (1 in screenshot) next to the program you no longer need, followed by Save Workspace 2.



WINDOWS 10 & 11

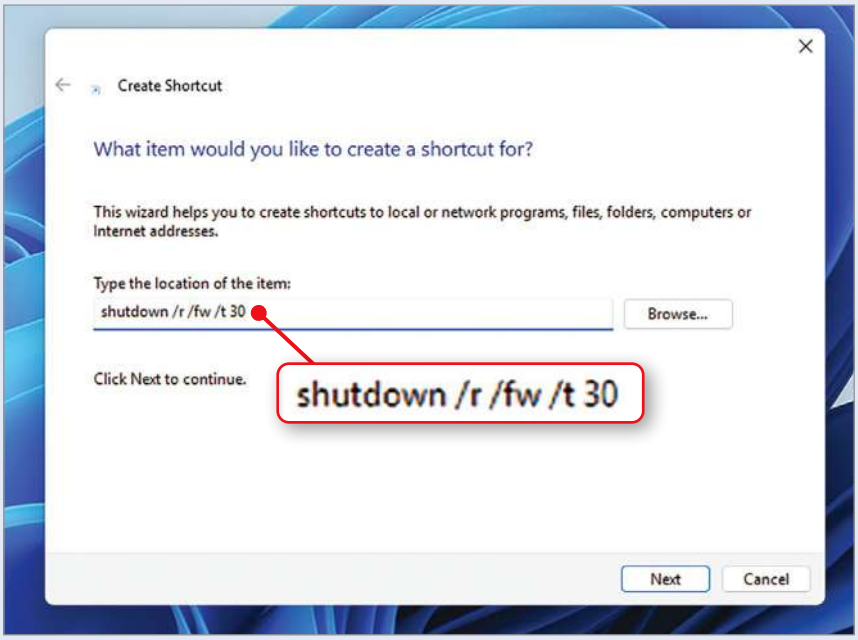
Create a delay before booting into BIOS

Back in Issue 662 we explained how to create a desktop button you can click to reboot into your computer's BIOS, saving you the hassle of tapping the F2, F10 or F12 keys during restart. You can refine this by delaying when your PC reboots, giving you time to do something else if necessary.

Right-click anywhere on the desktop, then click New, followed by Shortcut.

Now type shutdown /r /fw /t XX – where XX is the number of seconds you want to wait before rebooting. We've gone for 30 seconds (see screenshot).

Click 'Next', then give the shortcut a name and click Finish. It will appear on your desktop. Right-click it, then click Properties followed by the Advanced button and tick 'Run as administrator'. Click OK, then OK again. Now when you double-click the shortcut it'll reboot your computer into the BIOS.



WINDOWS 11 INSIDER

See what's playing on your PC on Lock screen

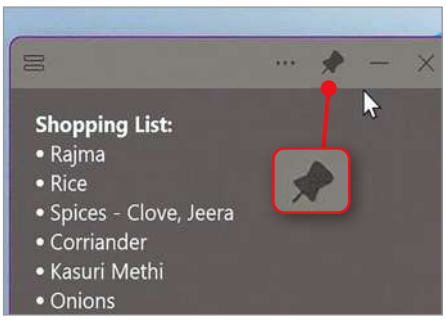
Update KB5043145 for Windows Insiders adds a bar to the Lock screen that shows any music or videos that are playing on your computer. This appears in a bar at the bottom (1 in screenshot below left). You can pause the audio 2, but the fast-forward and rewind buttons are greyed out at the moment. Microsoft says it's part of the update's 'gradual' rollout, so if you don't see it yet keep checking every couple of days.

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Pin Sticky Notes so they appear on top

Microsoft 365 subscribers can now 'pin' notes they create with Sticky Notes, popping them out of OneNote and placing them on top of other programs. This means you can easily see what you've written in a note as you browse the web, for example, because it always appears on top.

To do this, write your note, then click the top-right three-dot menu. Select 'Open in a new window' then click the pin icon (see screenshot below). This list of ingredients, which Microsoft uses as an example on its blog (www.snipca.com/52195), will now appear on top as you search online for them.

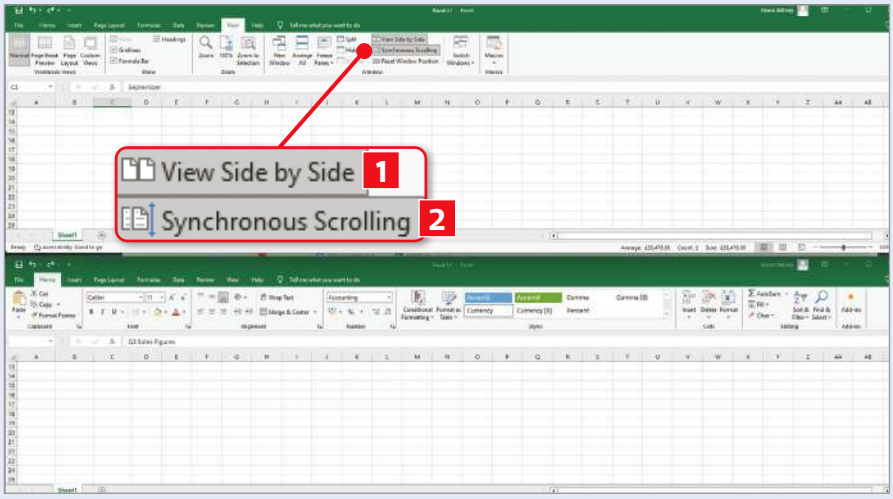


MICROSOFT EXCEL

Scroll multiple spreadsheets at the same time

Tucked away in the 'View' tab on Excel is a handy feature for simultaneously scrolling through two windows of the same spreadsheet. This is useful if you're comparing particularly large data sets.

Click the View tab, then New Window. When this new window opens, click View, then click Arrange All and decide how you want your spreadsheets to be presented (tiled, horizontal, vertical or cascade). Finally, click View again, followed by 'View Side by Side' (1 in our screenshot) then Synchronous Scrolling 2. In our example, we've set the spreadsheets to appear horizontally, one above the other.



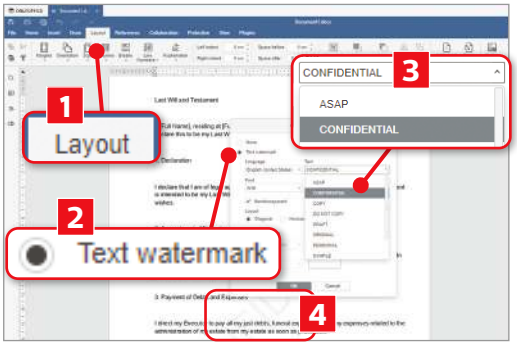
LibreOffice Calc doesn't have this tool, but you can use the Split Window mode as a partial workaround. Select a cell in your spreadsheet, then click View at the top followed by Split Window. This gives you panes you can move around, letting you split the sheet vertically or horizontally. You can't scroll both sheets at the same time though.

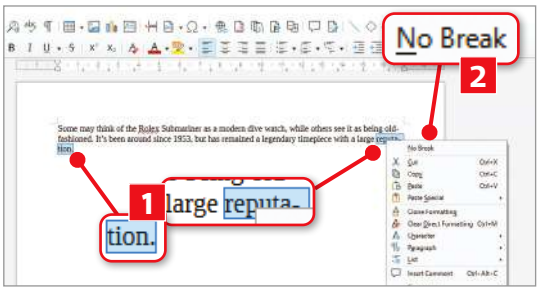
ONLYOFFICE

Add 'confidential' watermarks to your documents

You can add a watermark to OnlyOffice documents to indicate they're confidential. Click the Layout tab (1 in our screenshot below), followed by Watermark then 'Custom watermark'. Now choose whether you want your watermark as text or as an image – we've selected text 2

Next, type your own word in the Text box, or choose one from the dropdown menu (this includes Confidential 3). You can also choose the font, orientation, and whether the text is semi-transparent. Once that's done, click OK and you'll see the watermark appear across your document 4.





LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Stop words being hyphenated at the end of lines

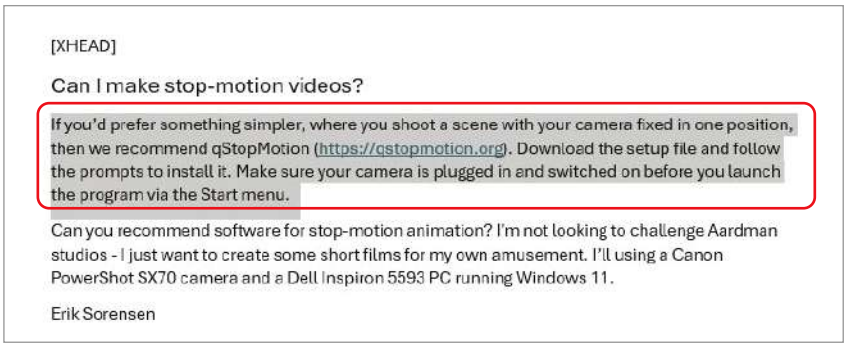
LibreOffice 24.8, released in August, makes it easier to prevent words from being hyphenated at the end of lines in Writer documents. First, highlight a hyphenated word that spans two lines, such as 'reputation' in our screenshot 1. Now right-click it, then click No Break 2, and the whole of the word will be moved to the next line.

Words treated in this way have a dotted grey line below them if you have Show Formatting Marks turned on. Do this with the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+F10, or by clicking View on the top toolbar then selecting Formatting Marks.

LIBREOFFICE WRITER & MICROSOFT WORD

Move paragraphs and bullet points quickly

Both Writer and Word have a keyboard shortcut for moving paragraphs or bullet points up or down a page. First, click to place the cursor anywhere in the paragraph or among the bullet points, then press Alt+Shift. Next, with these keys held down, press the Up or Down arrow keys to move the paragraph or bullet points. The text that's moving will be highlighted in grey (see screenshot below).



In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Create a chat room for your club

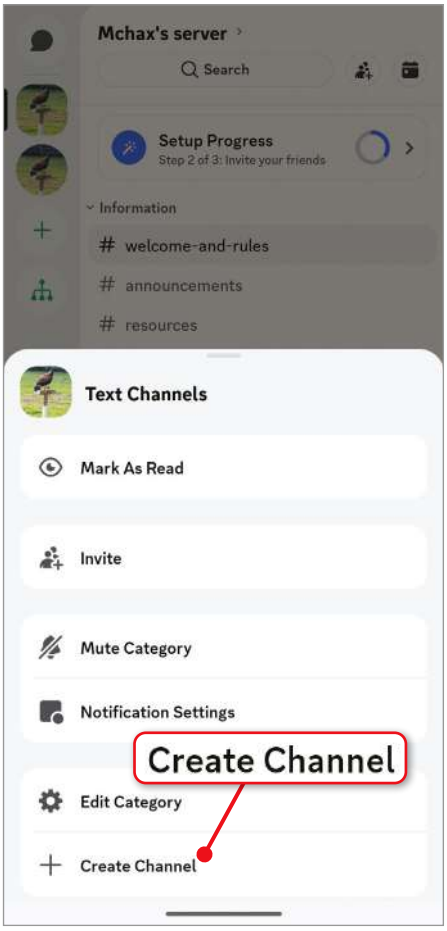
For almost a decade, Discord (https://discord.com) has been one of the most popular ways to communicate online. Although it first gained popularity among gamers, it's now used by plenty of different clubs and societies. Here we'll explain how to set up a Discord server (a virtual community) and a chat room (called a 'channel') within it. It's mostly free, though you'll have to pay for a Nitro subscription if you want to upload files of more than 10MB (see https://discord.com/nitro).

Register for Discord

First you need to install Discord on your computer, phone or tablet. It's just as easy to run a server from your mobile device as your computer, so here we'll explain how to set it up on an Android device. It works on iOS too, and while the interfaces may differ between devices and systems, the steps are the same, so you can follow our instructions even if you're installing Discord on a Windows PC or Apple iPad.

Download Discord from the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/52203) – for iOS visit www.snipca.com/52205 – then open it and tap Register. Enter your phone number or email address, then type your Display Name, which will appear in the Discord chat room. You may have to try several variations until you find one that hasn't already been taken by another Discord member.

Follow the rest of the sign-up instructions, which include choosing a password and solving a Captcha puzzle. Once you're in, Discord will offer to find contacts of yours who already use the platform, and you can allow them to find you too. Next, choose a profile picture from Discord's selection of avatars, or upload an image of your own.



Tap 'Create Channel' at the bottom of this menu to add a new text or voice channel

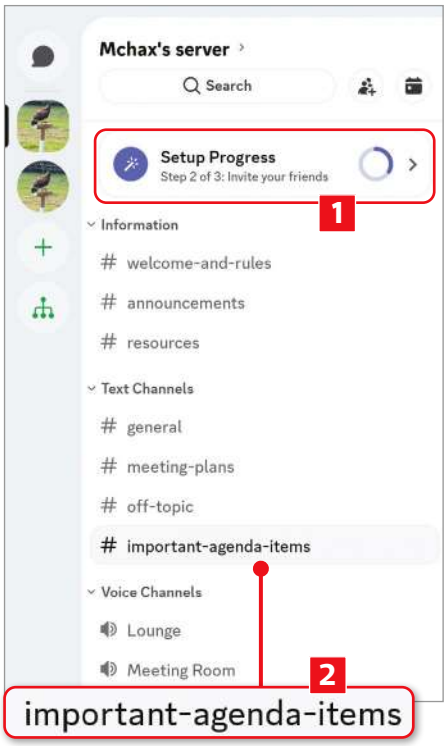
Name your server and channel

Ignore the option to add friends for now. Instead, tap the plus (+) icon on the left then Local Community at the bottom, followed by 'For a club or community'. Next, name your Server (which should probably be your club's name), then tap the plus (+) icon to upload an image, such as your logo.

Once you're happy with your choices, tap the top-right tick, then Create Server. Discord will provide a link to your server that you can save and send to people in your club. This expires after seven days.

Now that you have access to your server, you'll see three menus: Information (which explains more about Discord's rules and features), Text Channels and Voice Channels. The 'Text Channels' section contains three default channels: General, Meeting-plans and Off-topic. We're going to create another text channel to use as a chat room.

Long-press the Text Channels heading and another menu will appear, with options to invite people, turn notifications on and off, mute the category and edit a category. At the very bottom, you'll see a Create Channel option (see screenshot below left). Tap this, then give your new channel a name.



Once you've invited friends, select your channel's name and start typing

Next, decide whether you want it to be a text or a voice channel. The latter lets members talk live to each other. You can also make this channel private so only members you invite to the chat room (rather than anyone with access to the server) can participate. Make your choices, then tap Create at the top right.

If you haven't invited anyone to join yet, tap the Setup Progress bar (1 in screenshot above) then 'Invite your friends'. Now select the name of your channel in the Text Channels section (we've called ours 'important-agenda-items' 2) and type an introductory message. Tap the plus (+) icon to the left of the text-entry box to add photos and videos. You can also leave voice notes by tapping the Mic icon.

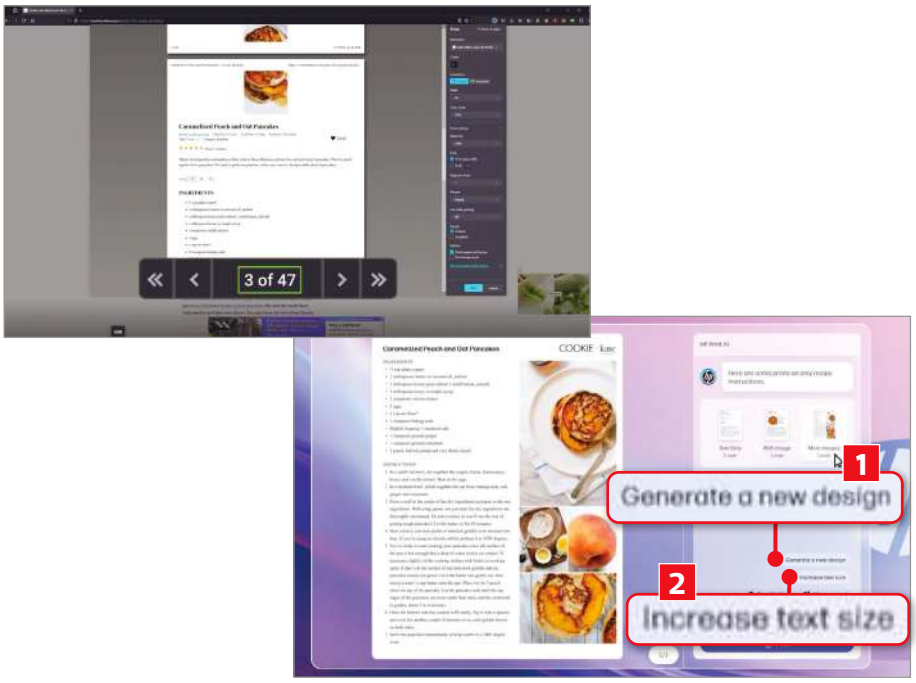
Next issue: Use nested and branched questions in surveys

What's All the

Fuss About...

AI printing

Your printer will soon learn how you want your pages to look



What is it?

New technology that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to improve your printing, such as by automatically removing elements from a page that it thinks you won't want.

Can you give an example?

Yes, it might remove adverts and white space from a web page, saving time, ink and paper. It can also resize images so they fit the page better. HP calls this 'Perfect Output', and it's part of the company's new set of Print AI tools – bridging "the gaps between what people see on the screen and what they intend to print". It says more than half of print jobs come from browsers, but people are rarely happy with the result – as you can see in the image above right.

Ah OK. So that's the print layout of a web page?

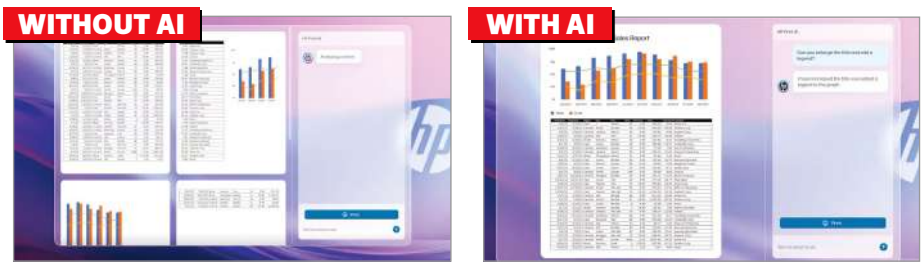
Yes, it's a "messy" layout according to HP (see www.snipca.com/52173). The image is cut in half, there's lots of empty space around the words, and lurking at the bottom is an advert. Now look at the "clean" image beneath and you'll see HP has reformatted the words and image for a neater printout. If you don't like it, you can 'talk' to its chatbot on the right, asking it to generate a new layout **1**, or give it instructions such as increasing the text size **2**. HP claims this is easier than clicking small buttons in print boxes and selecting fiddly settings. You can also improve how spreadsheets are printed.

How can they look better?

They appear on a single page, rather than spread across several. HP gives the example (below left) of a sales report placed above the data on a single page. You can ask it to make changes – in the example it has made the title bigger and added a legend – and it remembers your past preferences to offer better suggestions. It can even add your own photos to prints and offer different layouts, styles and fonts, allowing you to "personalise greeting cards for every occasion" – like having your own version of Moonpig.

How does it all work?

Like most AI tools, HP built a large language model (LLM) and trained it to read vast amounts of data, so it can understand the patterns of human-like text.



HP printers will soon excel at making spreadsheets fit better on a single page

Are other printer manufacturers using AI?

Yes, Brother, Lexmark, Sharp and Xerox all say they're building tools to improve printing. But HP seems to be way ahead.

Is all this just for business users though?

Some of the new tools will be aimed at businesses, such as Scan AI Enhanced which automatically recognises the type of documents being scanned and extracts important information. But the rest are for anyone who uses printers, whether at home or in an office. HP says there are even tools for setting up the printer, so you won't need to read the manual, and to check for paper jams and low ink.

Can I use these tools now?

No, you'll have to wait until 2025, when HP plans to make them available as add-ons to browsers and Microsoft Office programs. Ultimately it wants to build them into its printer drivers, so they'll simply work without you needing to install anything else. Some day your prints will come – just not yet.

DON'T BUY THE WRONG SMART TV

TVs have never looked or sounded better, and they're getting cheaper all the time. But there are so many available that it's hard to know which to buy. Daniel Booth tests the best and explains what all the jargon means

Many psychologists have studied the paradox of choice – where sifting through an abundance of options actually requires more effort, leaving us dissatisfied with our purchase. We see this now with smart TVs. There are so many of them, all packed with baffling audio and video technologies, that customers often don't quite know what they've bought.

In this feature, we'll show you how to avoid buyer's remorse. We name the best TVs in three price ranges (under £500; £500-£1,000; above £1,000) and explain the differences between them. The Gold winners represent the best balance of price, size and features, but the Silver and Bronze TVs also have excellent features that might suit you better.

However, unlike many buying guides you'll find online, we don't hedge our bets on certain issues, such as new streaming service Freely, 8K resolutions, and the number of HDMI ports you need. We also explain that you don't need to buy brand new at all – you can find some great refurbished models online.

With this knowledge you can confidently rule out all the TVs that aren't right for you until you find your perfect match. We wish you many happy years of viewing together.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Buy 50in 4K TVs for under £500
- Buy a 55in Mini LED TV for under £1,000
- Buy an 83in 4K TV for under £1,500
- Learn how OLED and QLED differ
- Discover whether 8K is worth buying
- Find refurbished TVs with one-year warranties

THE FIVE GOLDEN RULES OF BUYING A TV

1 You don't need a huge screen

It's easy to become overawed when standing in front of a wall of TVs in the showroom. The important thing to remember is that your lounge is almost certainly significantly smaller than the shop, and a TV that looks big in the store will dominate your living room.

It might even be difficult to watch. That's because there's a sweet spot where the size of the screen and the distance from your sofa are perfectly balanced. Too close, too big or both and you'll have to swivel your head from side to side to see the whole screen. Too small or too far away and you'll be squinting for details.

The secret according to the world's largest TV manufacturer Samsung is to multiply the screen size (measured from one corner to its diagonal opposite) by 1.2 to get the optimal viewing distance in metres or feet (pictured above right). Read the company's more detailed explanation at www.snipca.com/52090.

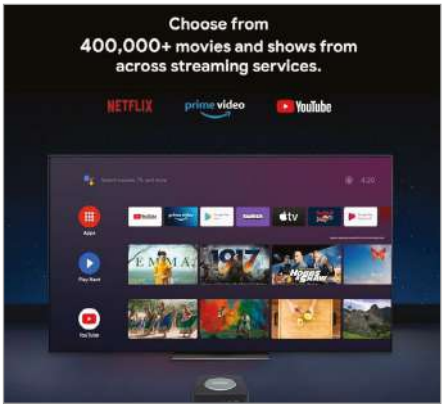
Or, if you're happy with a more approximate calculation, work in the opposite direction and stick a decimal point between the screen size's two digits. So, for example, if you'll be sitting five feet from the screen, you should be considering a 50in TV. But if you'll only be 3.5 feet away, opt for a 32in display.

Samsung recommends multiplying screen size by 1.2 to get the perfect viewing distance

2 Ensure the TV can provide what you want to watch

Check that the set supports all the streaming services and channels you want (as pictured below). If that's only the free-to-air channels, make sure it has an aerial or satellite connection.

If you're signed up to services like Netflix, Disney+, or Amazon Prime Video, check that the relevant apps are installed or available through the TV's app store.



Make sure the TV you're looking to buy supports all the streaming services you want

It's not a deal-breaker if they aren't, because there are workarounds, such as casting from your phone or connecting a streaming stick, but these services are easier to access and control with a single remote if they're installed on your TV.

At the same time, check that the manufacturer has a track record of releasing updates in a timely manner. Search forums to see what users of older models have to say about new features and new streaming services appearing on their devices.

Every manufacturer will eventually stop supporting their smart TVs because it becomes no longer profitable for them to do so, and new software will no longer be supported by old hardware, but it would be better if that cut-off point was several years down the line, not just a few months after you've splashed out on your TV set.

3 Choose a resolution for the future

Don't consider anything less than 4K resolution (3840x2160 pixels), unless you're buying a particularly small screen. More and more content is being broadcast or streamed in 4K, and you want a TV that can make the most of it.

Should you go bigger and buy an 8K (7680x4320) TV? Probably not. It might help you put off the day when you next need to upgrade, but bear in mind that as 8K technology becomes more common, prices for compatible sets will continue to fall. This means buying 4K today and 8K a few years from now may end up costing you less than opting for 8K now. Besides, there's precious little 8K content available right now to make it worth your while.

If your new TV doesn't come with a soundbar, consider buying one to improve sound quality

4 Sound is just as important as pictures

Pictures are only half the story. Don't forget the importance of high-quality sound. Tinny speakers will ruin a film, even when actors aren't mumbling their dialogue. It may be difficult to get a clear idea of speaker quality if buying in store, where there's likely to be background noise and the acoustics won't match your living room, but ask the assistants to turn up the volume nonetheless.

Check whether it comes with a soundbar (pictured above). If not, find out if it needs one and how much this will cost. Also, check if it has a surround-sound speaker system, and whether that's what you want. If you or a relative needs to wear headphones to hear dialogue clearly, can it feed audio to those and the speakers at the same time? Consider buying a speaker and soundbar in one package – such as the Ultimea Nova S50 (£50 from www.snipca.com/51457, see review Issue 690, page 29).

It's not a disaster if the speakers are underpowered: we've had good results connecting standard music speakers to our TV but again, if you're spending a lot on a new set, having everything in one box keeps things simple and cuts down on the number of trailing cables.

5 Make sure it has enough ports

While manufacturers can tweak a TV's software, its hardware is fixed, so check it has enough ports for streaming sticks, satellite boxes and so on.

With four spare HDMI ports, you'll be able to extend what your TV can do, but make sure they're HDMI 2.1 compatible. This latest version of HDMI adds support for variable refresh rate (VRR), which syncs the TV's refresh rate with the input device's to prevent flicker. HDMI 2.1 also supports ARC (see below) and Dynamic HDR formats (such as HDR10, HLG and Dolby Vision) that adjusts brightness, contrast and colour frame by frame.

HDMI 2.0 and 2.1 use the same 19-pin connector, meaning they look identical. Refer to the manual or manufacturer's website to find out which one your TV has.

If your TV has four HDMI ports, you'll be able to add plenty of sticks and set-top boxes over time

BEST BUDGET TVs: UNDER £500

What you'll get at this price

You often get more than you might expect in TVs for under £500. You can find 4K screens, support for Dynamic HDR formats and a full range of streaming apps, either already installed or available through a built-in app store. You can also get screens up to 55in, which would have been unimaginable a decade ago.

All this may require cutting a few corners elsewhere. In some cases, you might find the speakers don't sound as rich or powerful as you'd hope, in which case you should put money aside for external speakers or a soundbar. If you do, make sure your preferred set has the necessary connections. These could be as simple as a 3.5mm jack for regular external speakers or twin RCA or phono connectors for higher-quality speakers or if connecting to a Hi-Fi system.

However, a digital connection often delivers better results. By this, we mean either a digital optical port and lead, which use fibre optics to transmit sound data to the external speaker, or an HDMI ARC (pictured above right) or HDMI eARC port which, in contrast to standard HDMI ports that the TV uses for input, can send audio signals to compatible soundbars and other systems. Note that eARC supports more audio formats, giving you much better sound quality.

At the cheaper end, you may find that resolution drops from 4K to Full HD (1920x1080), but if you're buying a smaller screen, this isn't necessarily a reason to rule out any particular model – especially if you're shopping for a 'second' set for the kitchen or bedroom.

Use the TV's HDMI ARC or eARC slot to send audio signals to a soundbar

You might also have a limited number of free HDMI ports for connecting additional devices and, where they do exist, they may be HDMI 2.0 rather than HDMI 2.1-compatible. If so, they won't support the very highest resolutions at the fastest refresh rates.

GOLD AWARD

Amazon Fire TV 50in Omni QLED

£480 from www.snipca.com/52098

If you've previously made a 'dumb' TV smart by inserting an Amazon Fire TV stick, this set could be the ideal upgrade and a great way to remove cables and clutter from your setup. It has the easy-to-use Fire TV operating system built in, giving you instant access to Amazon Prime Video content, plus Netflix, Disney+ and more using their associated apps (subscription costs apply).

As a bonus, you can also access free-to-air channels, such as BBC, ITV and Channel 4 using the integrated Freeview tuner, which you'll appreciate if your viewing is primarily 'live', rather than done through catch-up services (though it has Freeview Play as well). You can control the TV using the remote control or Amazon's Alexa voice assistant. Because the assistant is built in, you can also command the TV to manage any smart lights and thermostats in your home.

Behind the glass, there's a QLED panel in which an arrangement of light-emitting diodes dynamically change size to allow through more or less light from the underlying LED backlight.

Fans of QLED claim it produces more accurate and vivid colours than older OLED panels, but not everyone agrees it's a better technology (see box right). Either way, it works a treat on this Fire TV. Tones are vibrant and punchy when they need to be in sunlit images, but subtle and pale in more atmospheric scenes.

A 50in screen won't suit everyone (see our section on screen sizes and viewing distances on page 51), so the fact it's also available in 43in (£380), 55in (£520) and a whopping 65in (£900) will be welcome by many.

SPECIFICATIONS

4K 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 50in QLED screen • Supports HDR10, HDR10+, HLG, Dolby Vision • 4x HDMI ports • 2x USB ports • 1x Ethernet port • 705x1120x90mm (HxWxD) • 11.5kg

OLED v QLED

The difference between organic light-emitting diode (OLED) and quantum light-emitting diode (QLED) comes down to how the LEDs in the screen create images, affecting everything from brightness and colour to contrast.

OLED TVs have been around for 20 years and can turn off individual pixels, producing stunning blacks and a wider range of colours, especially in dark scenes. Unlike OLED, which is a more generic technical term, QLED is Samsung's own description for TVs that have microscopic molecules called quantum dots that emit coloured light. Samsung claims this improves brightness levels and vibrancy in well-lit rooms.

Most side-by-side tests show OLED TVs have a better overall picture quality, but QLED TVs can always go brighter. Which you prefer is partly down to personal preference, but bear in mind that QLED is much cheaper to make than OLED. This results in cheaper prices on the shelf, so in almost all cases you get more for your money with QLED.

SILVER AWARD

Samsung CU8000

£430 from www.snipca.com/52110

This 55in set is much slimmer than our Gold Award-winner, making it ideal for wall mounting – which may be a good thing given that its feet are more than 90cm apart and so possibly wider than your TV bench.

4K content is impressively sharp and detailed, with even poor-quality streams looking better than you'd expect on a sub-£500 TV. It has three spare HDMI ports for external sources like DVD players, satellite boxes and streaming sticks – although you should find plenty of content to stream directly using apps.

These run on the same Tizen operating system as other Samsung televisions, and although you can't install Freeview Play, you can set up the individual apps for the UK broadcasters that you would otherwise find there. It also has a standard tuner for picking up free-to-air broadcasts when you'd rather not use an app.

But its screen is LED, not QLED, making it less bright and vivid than Amazon's Gold winner. Also, the speakers aren't quite as clear.

SPECIFICATIONS

4K 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 55in LED screen • Supports HDR10, HDR10+, HLG • 3x HDMI ports • 2x USB ports • 1x Ethernet port • 749x1232x226mm (HxWxD) • 15.8kg • five-year warranty

BRONZE AWARD

TCL 32SF540K

£145 from www.snipca.com/52100

This TV from Chinese manufacturer TCL breaks some of the five golden rules we laid out for buying a smart TV (see pages 51-52) – it's not 4K and doesn't have four spare HDMI slots, for example. But if you're shopping for a kitchen or bedroom TV, we reckon you could overlook these drawbacks, given the price.

What you get is a 32in screen with Full HD resolution (1920x1080 pixels) and a pair of HDMI ports for connecting DVD players, satellite boxes, streaming sticks and the like. It has Amazon's streaming platform built in, so you can immediately access Prime Video, and add other services using the integrated app store. That includes BBC, ITV and Channel 4, which you can access through the Freeview app.

It shows images on an LCD VA (vertical alignment) panel, which tend to handle shadows and darker tones particularly well, so you can expect good contrast.

Overall, picture quality is good for the price, but we were underwhelmed by the speakers, which don't make the most of the DTS and Dolby Audio features.

Thankfully, it supports HDMI eARC for connecting to a soundbar.

SPECIFICATIONS

Full HD 1920x1080-pixel resolution • 32in LED screen • Supports HDR10, HLG, Dolby Audio • 60Hz refresh rate • 2x HDMI ports • 1x USB port • 1x Ethernet port • 465x715x180mm (HxWxD) • 3.4kg • One-year warranty

AND ONE TO AVOID...

Sony KD-32W800

£297 from www.snipca.com/52217

Released in 2021, this 32in TV costs more than similar models and with a resolution of 1366x768 is only HD (not even Full HD, let alone 4K). It runs Android TV and has Freeview Play, so you won't have trouble watching programmes on catch-up. However, the panel's black levels are so bad they make dark scenes all but unwatchable. This robs such scenes of depth, and leaves them lacking subtle detail.

BEST MID-RANGE TVs: £501 TO £1,000

What you'll get at this price

You could easily splash your additional budget on buying a bigger screen, and our Gold winner is a 55in panel, if that's what you decide to do. A big screen isn't always your best option, though – especially if the size of your room means you'll be sitting too close to enjoy it.

While some TVs in the sub-£500 range offer 4K, it's all but guaranteed at this higher price point. The panels often use OLED or Mini LED components, which generally deliver accurate colours, good contrast and sharp details. Support for HDR video streams and games is also a given.

Sound-wise, it's fair to expect higher quality speakers and support for advanced audio technologies such as Dolby Atmos. However, as our reviews reveal, audio performance can vary, so make sure the TV you choose has at least one HDMI 2.1 port or other digital audio connection for hooking up a soundbar – in addition to any other HDMI inputs you need for video sources.

Perhaps the only area in which you're unlikely to see much of a change as you step up from the sub-£500 tier is software. Televisions in this price bracket tend to run the same operating systems and apps as their cheaper siblings.

GOLD AWARD

Samsung QN90C

£949 from www.snipca.com/52118

Prices for this outstanding TV have been dropping rapidly. It's available in several screen sizes, with all but the largest (65in) coming in at less than £1,000. This 55in model, for instance, is £949 at Amazon (down from its £2,399 launch price), and the 50in set costs £100 less than that.

With an anti-reflection coating, stunning brightness and excellent motion handling, it performs well in full daylight, which is ideal if you enjoy watching weekend sport without having to close the curtains. It supports three HDR formats and delivers some truly deep blacks for good contrast. This is all thanks to its Mini LED screen technology, which uses thousands of tiny LED backlights – rather than one large backlight as older LED panels do – to illuminate individual pixels. When combined with Samsung's QLED, it produces more accurate and responsive illumination across the image.

Computer active READER OFFER!

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In this special offer you can buy **Windows 11 Pro** for just £79.99 – that's £140 cheaper than Microsoft's full price of £219.99.

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JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **22 October, 2024**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

It runs the same Tizen operating system as the Samsung CU8000 (see p53) and Q80C (below), giving you access to all the streaming platforms you'd expect. If you prefer an alternative or want to connect a DVD player or satellite box, you can use the four HDMI 2.1 inputs at the back.

You might use one of the HDMI ports to connect to a third-party soundbar, or pair it with a Samsung soundbar to take advantage of the company's Q-Symphony feature for more spacious and dynamic audio. Even if you don't, it has superb audio for a decent performance all round.

SPECIFICATIONS
4K 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 55in QLED screen • Supports HDR10, HDR10+, HLG, Dolby Atmos • 4x HDMI ports • 2x USB ports • 1x Ethernet port • 768x1227x237mm (HxWxD) • 20.6kg

SILVER AWARD
LG OLED42C4
£889 from www.snipca.com/52119

Size isn't everything. LG's new £889 C4 might have 'only' a 42in screen (it is also available in sizes up to 83in), but it's a fantastic OLED TV for anyone who's short of space or simply doesn't want their room dominated by a gigantic display. In fact, it's the best 42in OLED TV we've ever tested.

This set is brighter than its predecessor, the C3, and is packed with features, including four HDMI 2.1 ports and three USB ports (the latter of which are useful for powering streaming sticks if you don't want to use the built-in streaming features). On that subject, the set runs LG's webOS operating system and supports all the major streaming services, including Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+, Apple TV+ and UK catch-up services from the main broadcasters.

Sound is occasionally flat and lacking in bass, but you can remedy this by adding a soundbar or other external speakers.

SPECIFICATIONS
4K 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 42in OLED screen • Supports HDR10, HLG, Dolby Vision • 4x HDMI ports • 3x USB ports • 1x Ethernet port • 577x932x170mm (HxWxD) • 10.1kg

BRONZE AWARD
Samsung Q80C
£708 from www.snipca.com/52128

This QLED TV's contrast, colour, brightness and sharpness were much closer to those of Samsung's more expensive TVs than we expected. In part, this is because the panel is illuminated directly from behind rather than from the edges of the screen, which means the TV can dim and brighten individual parts of the picture as required.

It has four HDMI 2.1 ports for adding external streaming services or a soundbar. Dialogue from the internal speakers is clear and effects are well balanced. It runs the Tizen operating system, which supports all the streaming services you'd expect of a modern smart TV.

If you're looking for something closer to our £1,000 limit, check out the 65in version of this television, which at the time of writing is available for £1,004 through the same link as the 55in model.

SPECIFICATIONS
4K 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 55in QLED screen • Supports HDR10, HDR10+, HLG, Dolby Atmos • 4x HDMI ports • 2x USB ports • 1x Ethernet port • 700x1220x46mm (HxWxD) • 19kg

Should you buy a TV with Freely?

Freely (www.freely.co.uk) is the long-term replacement for Freeview, offering live and catch-up TV over the internet in a single interface, rather than forcing you to hop between two menus. However, it's available only on new TVs, not as a separate box. That raises the question of whether Freely should be a key consideration when choosing a TV.

For now, we'd say no. Freely has potential and is well supported by BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5, but despite adding UKTV in September (see page 9) it still doesn't have the full range of Freeview channels (see the list at www.snipca.com/52114). You can add an aerial to receive more channels, but that defeats the object of switching from Freeview.

This doesn't mean you should avoid TVs that support Freely, but we can't see regulators pulling the plug on Freeview until the 2030s, so there's no urgency to buy now. And by the time you seriously need to consider switching to Freely, you should be able to get better-quality TVs for your money. If you want to make the change now though, consider Toshiba's range, which starts from £239 (www.snipca.com/51954), or the £599 Hisense model we reviewed in Issue 692 (page 29, www.snipca.com/51850).

AND ONE TO AVOID...
Hisense ULED 65U6KQTUK
£547 from www.snipca.com/52157

This is Hisense's attempt to make a budget Mini LED TV. You get a large screen for your money, but dark scenes often look grey and flat because the IPS screen lets through too much backlight. Colours are disappointing too, with reds especially looking too bold using the Standard preset. You can change this to the Dynamic mode, but that looks cartoonish and unnatural.

BEST TOP-END TVs: £1,001 TO £1,500 AND ABOVE

What to expect at this price

If your budget stretches beyond £1,000, you can expect something pretty special. Don't buy anything with less than a 4K resolution, but don't necessarily expect 8K – and remember that there are more important considerations than screen size. While you can buy a very large screen at this price, there's a tipping point where big becomes *too* big. If you're buying a 4K TV, it will have the same number of pixels whether its screen is 36in or 83in. So an 83in screen won't necessarily show any more detail than the smaller panel, and if you sit too close to it, your experience may be worse.

The panel is likely to use OLED or QLED-based technology to provide good contrast and colour reproduction. Lighting should be even and viewing angles generous. You should also expect more from the speakers, although your chosen set may still benefit from the addition of a soundbar (for which there should be a digital connection). That's because speakers have moving parts that need room to project sound, and that's in limited supply in a thin chassis.

What's more, as we said in the mid-range section, don't expect any significant improvement in the software. Manufacturers tend to roll out the same operating system across all their devices, which in our opinion is no bad thing. Logical design and easy access to the content you want is what matters most. Redesigning the interface for every screen probably wouldn't improve that.

GOLD AWARD

Samsung S95C

£1,399 from www.snipca.com/52150

This 55in OLED TV has an attractive metal case with a thin panel and no bezels around the screen. It supports all the HDR formats and is up to 30-per-cent brighter in HDR mode than its predecessor, the S95B. It's responsive, too, with no distracting blurriness in fast-moving action scenes, solid blacks in dark areas, and highlights that don't suffer from blooming – where bright objects have a glow around them, especially against dark backgrounds.

It has four HDMI 2.1 ports for connecting external devices, including games consoles that require high refresh

Should you buy a refurbished TV?

When companies describe a TV or other device as refurbished, it usually means there was a problem with it that has been repaired. This could be anything from a cracked screen or broken HDMI input to a few dead pixels. Retailers can refurbish TVs themselves, but manufacturers tend to do a better job because they have access to all the official parts and equipment. Look for phrases such as 'factory repaired' or 'manufacturer refurbished' in the product's description.

Refurbished items are covered by the Consumers Rights Act, so they must be of satisfactory quality, fit for purpose and as described.

Amazon Renewed

www.snipca.com/52166

TVs are among a range of refurbished devices Amazon sells. These have been tested by what Amazon calls 'qualified suppliers'. You'll also find refurbished TV boxes (such as Humax and Sky+ devices) and remote controls on the website. The warranty is one year.

Appliances Direct

www.snipca.com/52167

As well as refurbished TVs, Appliances Direct sells ex-display models. It grades devices A1 (Good), A2 (Average) or A3 (Working) – see www.snipca.com/52178. Warranties last at least six months.

Laptops Direct

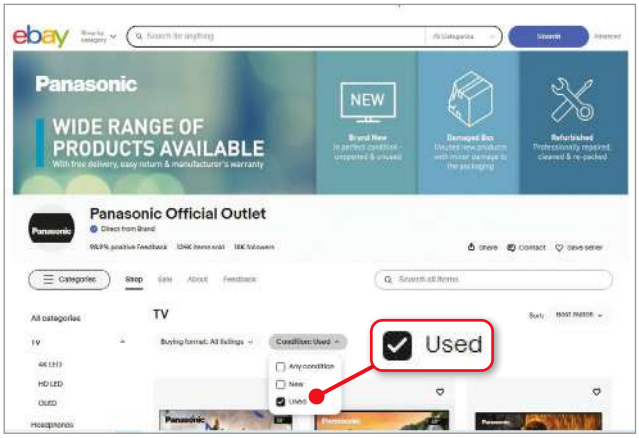
www.snipca.com/52180

This website had only 10 refurbished TVs when we checked, but they were all rated Excellent or Very Good. There's also a Good category, while Unique includes trade-ins from customers. Warranties are up to 12 months.

Panasonic eBay outlet

www.snipca.com/52168

Select 'Used' from the Condition menu (pictured below) to see Panasonic's refurbished TVs. The company says they've all been tested, repaired if necessary and then thoroughly cleaned.



Select 'Used' in Panasonic's eBay outlet to see refurbished TVs

rates, and soundbars. We recommend adding a soundbar because although sound quality from the built-in speakers is OK, it lacks sophistication and bass. Also, with a compatible soundbar you can use Samsung's Q-Symphony feature, which combines the soundbar's output with that of the TV's speakers for a more immersive soundscape.

The TV uses the Tizen operating system, which provides access to all the mainstream streaming apps. If you want to use an alternative operating system, you can connect a streaming stick to one of the HDMI ports.

Samsung has recently released this TV's successor, the S95D, and while it claims that the new model improves balance and consistency, buying last year's model can save you a lot of money. The price quoted above is for the 55in S95C, but you'll need to budget an extra £300 for the more recent S95D.

SPECIFICATIONS
4k 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 55in OLED TV • Supports HDR10, HDR10+, HLG, Dolby Atmos • 4x HDMI ports • 3x USB ports • 1x Ethernet port • 771x1225x268mm (HxWxD) • 23.9 Kg

SILVER AWARD
LG C4
£1,199 from www.snipca.com/52153

Don't be put off by this TV's 48in screen just because you can get a larger one for the price. The C4's 4K OLED panel has punchy colours that don't look garish, and it achieves a pleasingly crisp effect that gives images a real sense of solidity and depth. The TV's webOS software offers a strong selection of global and UK streaming apps, although we feel the home screen has too many adverts (and it could get worse – see page 7).

It has four HDMI 2.1 ports for external devices such as satellite boxes and DVD players. These also allow you to connect a soundbar, and if you choose one made by LG, you'll benefit from the TV's WOW Orchestra feature which, like Samsung's Q-Symphony, combines the soundbar's output with that of the TV's internal speakers.

SPECIFICATIONS
4k 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 48in OLED screen • Supports HDR10, HLG, Dolby Atmos & Vision • 4x HDMI ports • 3x USB ports • 1x Ethernet port • 670x1070mmx230 (HxWxD) • 16.8kg

BRONZE AWARD
TCL 85C805K
£1,498 from www.snipca.com/52152

At 85in, this QLED TV is huge, yet at less than £1,500 it won't break the bank. It would completely dominate anything approaching a normal-sized room, but if you've got space for it, why not? It could even be the centrepiece of a dedicated home-cinema room. It has more HDR formats than most TVs at a similar prive and has localised dimming to control the level of illumination across the screen.

Picture quality is great, with bright images and solid blacks. Colours were vibrant and well saturated in our tests, even in the brightest areas, although the screen is prone to reflections, so bear that in mind when deciding where you'd put it.

The biggest drawback is that the Google TV operating system lacks BBC iPlayer, so you'd need to add it by plugging a streaming stick into one of the four HDMI ports. ca

SPECIFICATIONS
4K 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 85in QLED TV • Supports HDR10, HDR10+, HLG, Dolby Atmos & Vision • 4x HDMI ports • 1x USB port • 1x Ethernet port • 1156x1890x385mm (HxWxD) • 42.2kg

AND ONE TO AVOID...
Samsung QN900D
£3,560 from www.snipca.com/52177

This is probably the best 8K TV we've seen, but there simply isn't enough genuine 8K content to justify spending so much. What Samsung and other manufacturers do is upscale existing 4K content to 8K, which means estimating which additional pixels it needs for a higher resolution. This can lead to a lack of detail and distortion. By the time there's enough real 8K content, prices should have fallen much lower.

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STOP YOUR DEVICES LISTENING TO YOU

Ever had the sneaking suspicion your phone, tablet or PC is eavesdropping on your private conversations? Well, they very well might be. **Jonathan Parkyn** explains how to stop them

We've all felt the sense of creeping unease that comes with being faced by an advert for the exact same product we were talking about with friends or family only a day or two before.

Before you shout "conspiracy theory", bear in mind that only very recently (see Named & Shamed, Issue 693, page 21) we reported on fresh evidence that marketing firms are brazenly promoting software that can listen into customers' conversations via their phone's microphone. And that's before we've even considered all the malicious apps and programs that could allow scammers and hackers to eavesdrop on you without your consent.

It's not just phones, either. Tablets, computers, smart speakers and even TVs all now have the potential to snoop on you via built-in mics designed for features such as voice control and video chat. Here, we'll explain how to stop them.

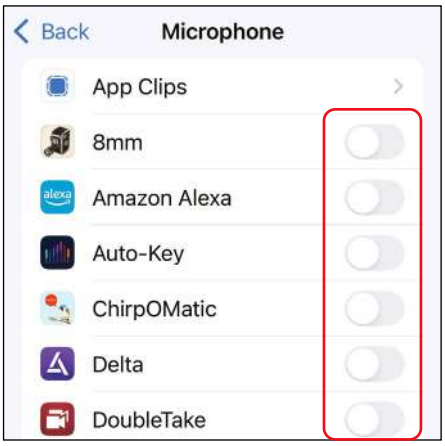
Stop specific apps using your microphone

It's actually legal for phone and tablet apps to listen to you without your knowledge – as long as you've granted them permission to use your device's microphone. And it's all too easy to do this unintentionally.

In Android, check which apps have microphone access by tapping Settings, 'Security and privacy', Privacy, 'Permission manager', then Microphone.

However, precise instructions vary depending on make and model, so if you can't find this option simply type microphone into the Settings app's search bar instead. Installed apps are grouped under three headings: 'Allowed all the time', 'Allowed only while in use' and 'Not allowed'. To block any of the apps under the first two headings, tap them, then select the 'Don't allow' option (see screenshot above).

In Android, tap an app's heading, then select 'Don't allow'



On an iPhone or iPad, tap an app's slider to block access to the microphone

On an iPhone or iPad, tap Settings, 'Privacy & Security', then Microphone to see which apps have requested access to your microphone. To block one, tap its slider to switch it off (see screenshot above right).

Bear in mind that blocking an app's microphone access may affect its ability to fulfil its intended function. Blocking Zoom, for example, will prevent people from hearing your voice during video calls.

Stop your phone's smart assistant listening out for you

Voice-controlled assistants like Apple's Siri and Google Assistant are designed to keep an ear open, waiting for you to say "Hey/OK Google" or "Hey Siri". On an Android device, the Google Assistant settings are usually found under Settings, Apps, then Assistant (or open the Settings app and search for assistant). Tap 'Lock screen' on the main Assistant settings screen and disable the options that let your phone listen out for you without you unlocking it first.

To prevent your device listening out for you entirely – unlocked or not – go back to the main Assistant settings screen, tap 'Hey Google & Voice Match', then switch off the Hey Google setting.

In iOS, tap Settings then Siri. If you don't want Siri to listen at all, tap 'Talk to

Siri' and select Off. You can still use Siri on an ad hoc basis if you enable the 'Press Side Button for Siri' option below. Alternatively, if you just want to stop Siri listening in when your phone's screen is locked, go to the main Siri settings screen and turn off Allow Siri When Locked.

Prevent your PC or laptop listening in

If you have a desktop PC with an external mic or webcam, you can disconnect it until you need it. Unfortunately, this is not usually an option for laptops, which typically come with built-in microphones. You can, however, use Windows settings to limit microphone access.

In Windows 10, open the Settings app (press Windows key+I), then click Privacy followed by Microphone on the left. Next, at the top of the page, disable the 'Microphone access' option to block all access. Below this, turn off 'Let apps access your microphone' to disable mic access for all Microsoft Store and installed apps, or turn off access for individual apps.

Scroll down and you'll find more sliders that let you block desktop apps as well, though Microsoft warns that some might not work properly if you do. These instructions also apply to Windows 11, except that you need to click 'Privacy & security' and the Microphone option is in the middle of the screen, not on the left.

There's also a hidden setting to prevent Windows and *all* software from accessing your microphone. In Windows 10 right-click the speaker icon in your system tray (at the far right of your taskbar) followed by 'Open Sound settings'. Next click Sound Control Panel (1 in our screenshot below) then the Recording tab 2. Finally right-click your microphone 3 and select Disable 4. Right-click it and select Enable to reverse the process.

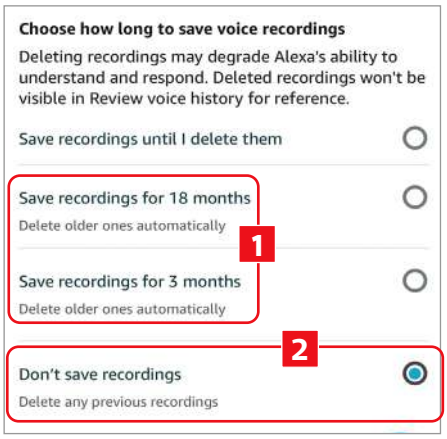
In Windows 11 you'll find this option by opening Settings, then clicking System, Sound and scrolling down to and clicking 'More sound settings'.

Stop your smart speaker snooping

Just like Siri and Google Assistant, your smart speakers are always waiting for you to wake them with the trigger word. They can also upload recordings of your voice to the manufacturer's servers, in order to process your request and improve the service. You can minimise how often your smart speaker listens in by manually switching off its microphone when you're not using it. Most recent models have a physical mute button to disable the microphone.

You can also take more control over how your voice data is used and stored. Precise instructions will vary depending on your model, but Alexa users can open their smartphone app and tap More, Settings, then Alexa Privacy. Tap 'Review Voice History' to see and delete recent recordings.

Alternatively, you can tap 'Manage your Alexa Data', then 'Choose how long to save voice recordings' and opt to delete your voice data automatically every three or 18 months (1 in our screenshot above). Select 'Don't save recordings' 2 to delete your entire history of voice recordings. Tap Confirm when done.



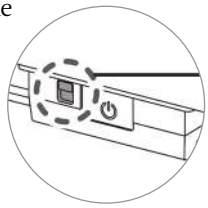
Tell Alexa to delete your voice recordings every three or 18 months, or not to save them at all

Disable your PC's microphone to stop it working in Windows and all other software

Disable your smart TV's microphone

Smart TVs with microphones generally fall into two categories: models that have it built into the remote control, and those with it built into the TV. Check your manual for details. If your set uses remote-based voice controls, you may not need to worry – in most cases, the remote control's mic remains turned off unless you activate it by holding down the mic button.

If your TV's microphone is built into the TV, however, it may be always on unless you take action. Some TVs have a physical switch that lets you turn the microphone off. On certain recent Samsung models, for example, there's an on/off switch for their microphone on the underside edge of the frame – either in the centre or towards the right-hand side of the screen (see Samsung's illustration above).



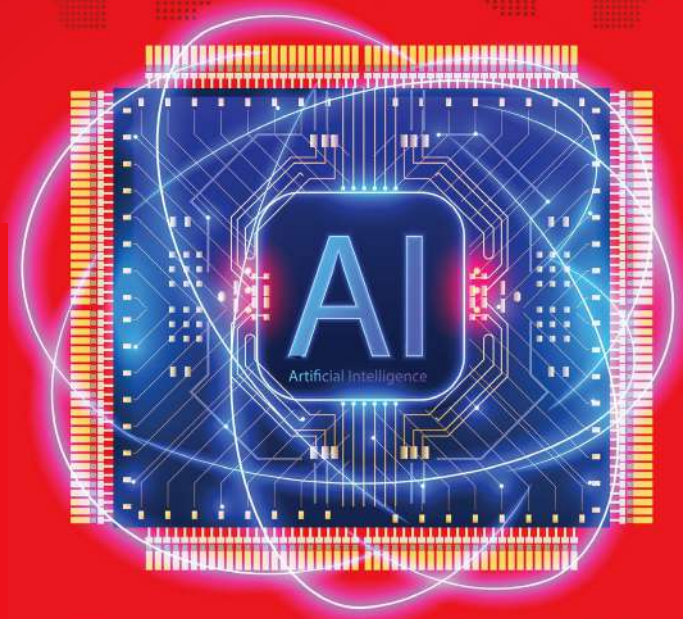
Other models may require you to dig around in the on-screen settings. On some recent LG smart TVs, for instance, go to Settings, 'All settings', General, AI Service, then Voice Recognition Settings to stop the microphone listening out for your voice commands. ca

How to tell if your phone mic is being used

Both Android and iOS let you quickly identify whether your microphone is listening in and reveal which app is using it. Android shows a small green dot in the top-right of the screen when your microphone or camera are being accessed. Swipe down on this, then tap the green mic icons to see which app is responsible. Tap the down arrow next to the app's name, then tap 'Manage permissions' to block the app or tap 'See recent mic usage' to see how often the app has been accessing your microphone.

In iOS, you'll see a small orange dot in the top status bar whenever the microphone is accessed (or a green dot if your camera is being used). If you see this, open the Control Centre by swiping down from the top right of the screen (or swipe up from the bottom of the screen, if your model has a Home button on the front). At the top there will be an orange microphone icon and the name of the app that's currently accessing it.

Why you need an AI PC



AI laptops are now available to buy, but what benefits do they offer over standard PCs? **Robert Irvine** cuts through the hype to explain the best reasons to own one

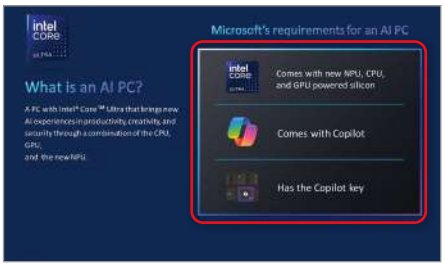
As AI software becomes ever more powerful and sophisticated, standard PCs are struggling to meet its demands. Though you can comfortably run tools such as ChatGPT on your current device, more resource-intensive AI tasks require hardware to match.

In this feature, we explain why you should consider upgrading to one of the many new AI laptops that have gone on sale recently.

What defines an AI PC?

The main difference between a standard home computer and an AI PC is that the latter has a neural processing unit (NPU) in addition to a CPU and GPU. This new type of PC component is designed specifically to accelerate neural-network operations, which mimic the behaviour of the human brain, and other AI tasks – as we'll explain later.

According to Microsoft's definition, an AI PC is one that has an NPU, the company's Copilot AI assistant and a dedicated Copilot button on its keyboard (see screenshot below left). However, this three-pronged definition really only applies to its Copilot+ AI laptops (www.snipca.com/52094), which are being made by Acer, Asus, Dell, HP, Lenovo, Samsung and its own Surface brand. As Microsoft stipulates, these have at least 16GB of RAM and 256GB of storage. The HP OmniBook X14 (see review on page 23) is one example.



Microsoft states that AI PCs need an NPU, Copilot and a Copilot key on the keyboard

A PC that has an NPU but not Copilot can still be classed as an AI model, but as Microsoft's assistant is tightly integrated with Windows 11, any new laptop is likely to include it. Currently, only laptops have NPUs, but desktop PCs that support the technology are coming soon.

Five reasons to buy an AI PC

Faster and more power-efficient

An NPU's performance is measured in tera (trillion) operations per second, or TOPS. Qualcomm's Snapdragon X, AMD's Ryzen AI 300 and Intel's new Lunar Lake processors all deliver 45 TOPS from their NPUs. Microsoft requires all Copilot+ PCs – such as its 7th-generation Surface Laptop (pictured above right) – to be capable of at least 40 TOPS.

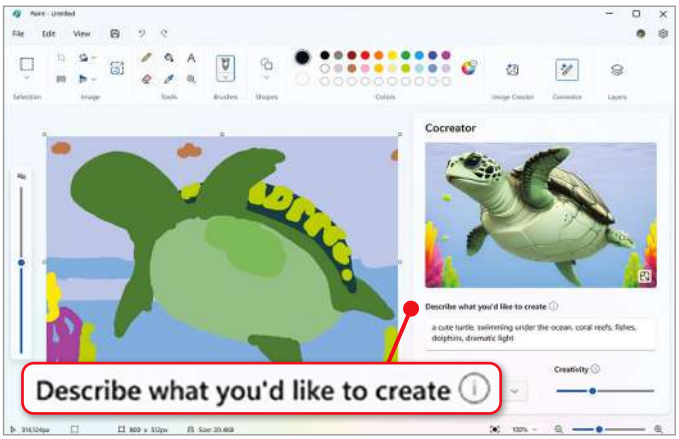
This incredible speed allows the NPU to handle resource-intensive AI tasks while the CPU and GPU focus on core PC functions, resulting in a smoother, faster system that's less likely to crash. As AI PCs have a lot of memory, you'll notice a boost in speed and stability even when you're not using the NPU. The system allocates its resources dynamically based on what you're doing, so you can perform multiple tasks without programs and folders hanging.

Microsoft's latest Surface Laptop has a Snapdragon NPU offering 45 TOPS

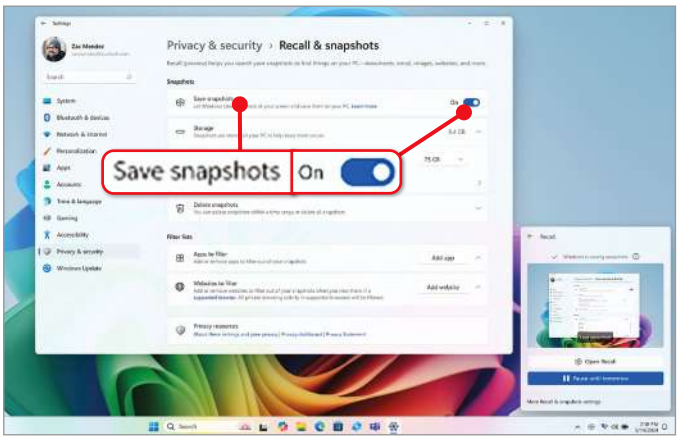
NPUs also prolong battery life by performing activities at lower power than a CPU or GPU. This means your laptop will last longer between charges, and when NPUs come to desktop PCs, they'll help reduce your energy bill, too. An AI machine may even tweak your fan speeds and system temperatures to keep power consumption under control.

Enhanced image and video editing

In our 'Why you must use AI' Cover Feature in Issue 688 (page 50), we recommended free programs for editing photos and videos using AI, but warned that they can seem slow. That's because, on a standard PC, AI software relies on your CPU and GPU to perform tasks such



Microsoft Paint's new Cocreator AI tool requires an NPU with 40 TOPS



Microsoft's Recall tool may prove more of a help than a privacy threat

as 'upscaling' images and videos, and removing backgrounds and objects.

On an AI PC, the NPU will handle these tasks because it's designed to cope with their demands. Not only will your PC perform them faster, but you won't be so limited by current hardware constraints, allowing you to be more ambitious with your edits and the effects you apply, as well as the size and number of image, video and audio files you can process.

On a Copilot+ PC, for example, you can enjoy NPU-accelerated AI features in the powerful video editors DaVinci Resolve and CapCut. Meanwhile, Microsoft Paint has a new Cocreator image-generation tool (see screenshot above).

Improved privacy and security

The growing popularity of AI tools has raised concerns about user privacy and security. Because many services are either based in the 'cloud' or connect to the internet to retrieve information, there's a risk that hackers could intercept your personal data. This danger is increased by the fact that many AI tools store and share your messages, images and other content for 'training purposes'.

With the processing power, speed and versatility of an AI PC, most tasks can be performed locally (ie, on your PC), with no need to send any data into the cloud. This is both speedier and more secure, ensuring your data stays on your own PC.

However, it's just as important for integrated AI features to respect your privacy. The initial backlash to Microsoft's new Recall AI search tool, which takes screenshots of your activities every few seconds, suggests Windows users aren't willing to be spied on just to try some clever new technology.

Unique AI-powered features

Microsoft has since clarified that Recall encrypts its screenshots and stores them only on your device, and switching it on (see screenshot above right) will help you quickly find content across any program on your AI PC. Copilot+ laptops have lots of other useful features to try, too, on top of the eponymous chatbot and Paint's Cocreator tool.

For example, Live Captions – a Windows 11 accessibility feature for transcribing audio into text – uses your NPU to instantly translate any live or pre-recorded audio that plays on your Copilot+ PC. Another AI-powered feature, Windows Studio Effects, automatically improves the lighting and blurs background distractions in video calls, and can even adjust your gaze to simulate eye contact while you're reading text.

Some manufacturers have created their own AI apps for their Copilot+ PCs. Asus MuseTree turns basic sketches and text prompts into stunning artwork (www.snipca.com/52161), while HP's AI Companion checks your system settings to ensure you have the optimum configuration (www.snipca.com/52163). Acer's User Sensing, meanwhile, switches your screen off when you step away from your PC, and back on again when you return (www.snipca.com/52165).

Be ready for Windows 12

Microsoft's focus on Copilot+ laptops is no doubt a sign of things to come for Windows 12, which could arrive as soon as autumn 2025. It's likely that the new operating system will lean heavily towards AI features, and an NPU may even be a system requirement.

Buying an AI PC now will prepare you for Windows 12 by giving you the technology – including enough RAM and storage – to support the upgrade when it arrives. This is worth bearing in mind if you're thinking of buying a Windows 11 laptop before Microsoft ends security updates for Windows 10 next October – see our Cover Feature in Issue 693.

If the PC you buy doesn't have the right specifications for Windows 12, you'll either have to buy another one when the operating system is released or stick with Windows 11 and miss out on many AI benefits.

Test your current PC's AI capabilities

Even if your current PC doesn't have an NPU, it may still be able to run AI software. To test its AI capabilities, download the Windows version of Geekbench AI (www.snipca.com/52175), which is also available for macOS, Linux, Android and iOS.

This benchmarking tool runs 10 AI 'workloads' to determine how well your hardware can handle 'real-world' AI applications and tasks. These include image classification, object and face detection, and image super-resolution (or upscaling).

Select your CPU, GPU or NPU in the AI Backend menu, then click Run AI Benchmark (see screenshot). The tests should take about 10 minutes. Once complete, Geekbench AI will upload your scores to the Geekbench Browser (www.snipca.com/52176), where you can compare them with others – the higher, the better.

Geekbench AI is free to use, but if you want to save results offline and run it from a USB stick you need a $99 (£74) licence.

Problems **Solved**

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

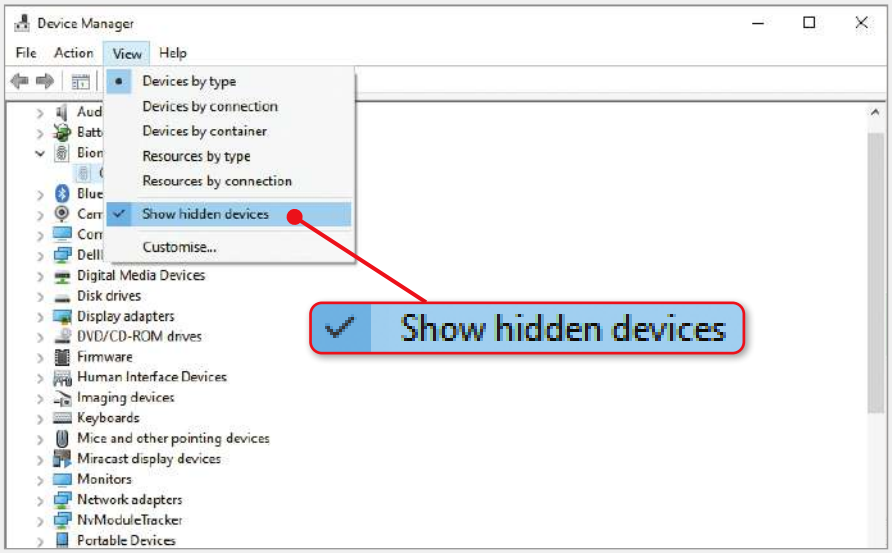
Why has the fingerprint reader on my laptop stopped working?

Q I've had my Dell laptop for about three years. For all of that time I've logged in using my fingerprint, via the scanner built into the power button. Save for the odd moment when it doesn't recognise a greasy fingertip, this has always worked well – until recently.

I didn't realise this was a problem at first because, as I say, occasionally it wouldn't work for obvious reasons, so I just tapped in my four-digit PIN code instead. After a week or so of doing this I came to the conclusion that the fingerprint reader just isn't working any more.

I checked in the 'Sign-in options' screen of Windows 10's Settings screen, where it says no compatible fingerprint scanner could be found. But I know my laptop has a compatible fingerprint scanner, because it's worked well for years. Do you have any idea what's going on, and how to restore this function? I think a big Windows 10 update was applied around the time it stopped working – could that be the cause?

Andrew Mason

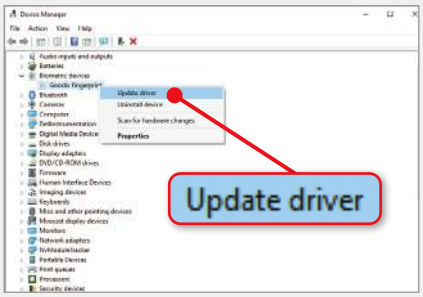


If you don't see 'Biometric devices' in Device Manager, tick 'Show hidden devices'...

A Certainly any Windows update, big or small, has the potential to introduce new problems – either through bugs or by effectively rendering redundant something that previously worked perfectly. We see this latter problem a lot with older printers and scanners, for example. The cause in this instance is often older drivers that have become unsafe, so Microsoft effectively washes its hands of the problem by disabling them – and the original device manufacturers rarely develop updated versions for ageing models.

So, while we don't know exactly which Dell laptop you have, it's possible that a Windows 10 update directly or indirectly caused this problem. Or, it could simply be a glitch, which Microsoft often brings about, albeit unintentionally.

To start your investigations, first press Windows key+X to open the Quick Link menu then click Device Manager. Look for an entry labelled 'Biometric devices' then click to expand it. If you don't see it, open the View menu and click to tick 'Show hidden devices' (see screenshot above). Next, under 'Biometric devices' look for an entry referring to a fingerprint reader and then right-click before choosing 'Update driver' (see screenshot left). Next, click 'Search automatically for drivers'. Now restart your laptop.



...then under 'Biometric devices', right-click fingerprint reader and choose 'Update driver'

It's possible that this alone will fix the problem, by finding and re-activating the existing driver. If not, repeat the process but this time choose 'Browse my computer for drivers' followed by 'Let me pick from a list of drivers on my computer'. Next, tick the 'Show compatible hardware box', then tick the relevant fingerprint reader (if it appears) then click Next and restart your laptop again.

If neither method works, we'd suggest uninstalling the existing drivers and starting afresh. First, visit the Dell support website at www.dell.com/support. Search for your laptop model then look through the drivers to download the latest fingerprint-sensor driver for your machine.

Next, return to Device Manager, right-click the fingerprint scanner and choose 'Uninstall device' then confirm by clicking the Uninstall button. Restart your laptop then double-click the EXE driver file downloaded from the Dell website, and follow the prompts to install the software.

Will I have to upgrade to Windows 11 before October 2025?

Q **Windows 10 keeps pestering me to install Windows 11, which I don't want (I don't like its look, for starters). Today, I learned from a news website that Microsoft is going to stop all support for Windows 10 in October 2025. Is this true? If so, what does it mean for people like me, who don't want to upgrade? Will I be forced to do so?**

Wes Hughes

A No one can force you to upgrade from Windows 10. If you want to continue using it after Microsoft drops support then you're free to do so, just as there are still some who soldier on with Windows 7 or even XP.

However, these people are now using those outdated versions of Windows at their own risk, because Microsoft no longer fixes any newly discovered vulnerabilities in them. The same will be true of Windows 10. Support for this version officially ends in October 2025 (www.snipca.com/51741 – see screenshot).

However, before that point Microsoft will release details of a phase known as Extended Security Updates (or ESU). This is intended to be a form of life support for organisations and consumers won't stop using Windows 10.

Microsoft will charge a subscription for the privilege of receiving 'critical' or 'important' security updates. For businesses, this will be $61 (around £47) for the first year, but doubling every year thereafter – an obvious incentive to move people away from the old operating system. The consumer pricing for ESU has yet to be announced, but if you sign up you should be able to continue using Windows 10 safely after October 2025 – and probably for two or three years more, at least.

Should a typical home user consider paying for ESU? If you intend to stick with Windows 10 then yes – that would be sensible. However, Microsoft has a history of making important Windows ESU fixes available to the wider public, even if they haven't paid for a subscription. The last Windows 7 update, for example, was released well over a year after the official end of support, and to all users (see www.snipca.com/51745).

Microsoft will end support for Windows 10 in October 2025 – though it's offering paid-for extended support

Another option is to pay just over £25 a year for Windows 10 'micropatches' from Slovenian company 0patch. It plans to provide these until 2030, which could outlast Microsoft's ESU scheme. Visit www.snipca.com/51999 and click 'Create a free account'.

We covered all your options in Issue 693's Cover Feature 'Windows 10 is doomed' – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/52109.

Why won't my Acer laptop's keyboard work?

Q **I have an Acer Aspire 3 laptop. Every key, apart from the power button, has stopped working. I can connect an external keyboard to my laptop and it works fine. I'm assuming it's not the hardware as the power button still works. I've followed all the suggestions online that I can find, but nothing works. Any suggestions?**

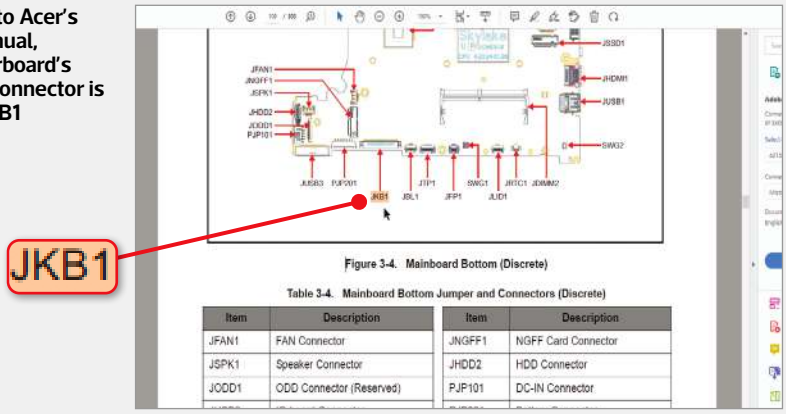
Gary Kirby

A Actually, it probably *is* a hardware problem. Our guess is that the ribbon cable that connects the keyboard to the laptop's motherboard has come loose. The power button is either on its own circuit, or happens to be looped through a part of the connector that's still in contact with its socket, probably at the connector's very edge.

You didn't tell us your exact Aspire 3 model, but fundamentally you need to open it up, find the keyboard ribbon and matching connector and make sure it's pushed fully in.

Acer doesn't publish service manuals online, but you can find them at ManualsLib (www.manualslib.com) by searching for the model number and service manual. For example, we found the Acer Aspire A315-53G service manual at www.snipca.com/51897. Section 3-4 of this manual shows where to find the keyboard connector on the motherboard, where it's probably labelled JKB1 (see screenshot). Make sure the keyboard ribbon connector is pressed fully home into this socket and that should hopefully fix your problem.

According to Acer's laptop manual, the motherboard's keyboard connector is labelled JKB1



Why do websites think I'm using an ad-blocker?

Q I'm having problems with Chrome – I keep seeing a lot of messages asking me to turn off my ad blocker. However, I don't have one installed (and have checked through my installed extensions). I've tried searching online for help, but got nowhere. Any ideas?

Bob Phillips

A We wonder if you're using an extension or other software that isn't an ad blocker but that has ad-blocking features as a secondary mission? For instance, many VPN tools will try to block adverts as part of their day-to-day operations. This could include VPN extensions, incidentally – so we suggest that you take another look at what you have installed and activated.

The popular Windscribe extension, for example, has a built-in ad blocker that's enabled by default. To disable it, first click the Windscribe icon in your Chrome toolbar, then open the Windscribe menu (three horizontal lines) before clicking Blocker (see screenshot 1). Now just flip the Ad Crusher switch to its Off position 2.

To disable the ad blocker in the Windscribe extension, click Blocker...

...then switch off the Ad Crusher slider

How do I create screenshots without a PrtScn key?

Q I recently bought a small budget keyboard to use on my second PC, but I've realised it does not have a Print Screen (PrtScn) key to create screenshots. Is there another alterative I can use?

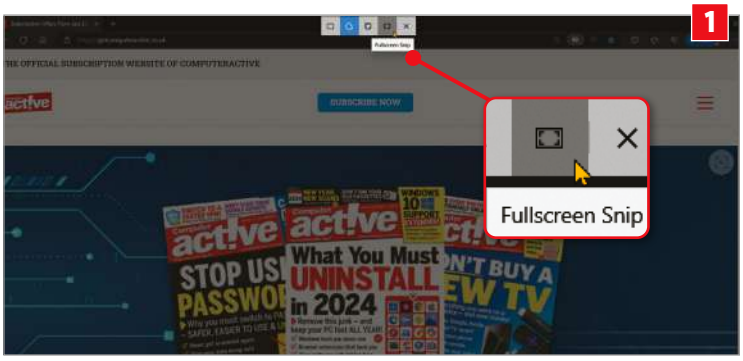
Trevor White

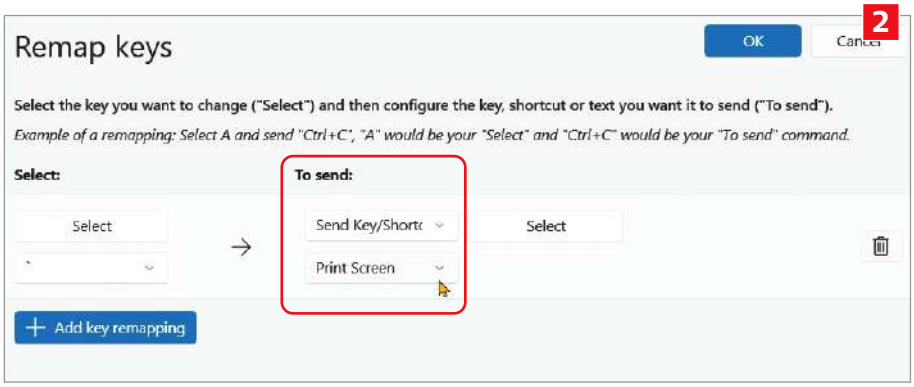
A There are a few options here. The first is to use Microsoft's Snipping Tool, which in either Windows 10 or 11 can be summoned by using the keyboard shortcut Windows key+Shift+S. When the little Snipping Tool bar appears at the top, you can capture the full screen to the Windows Clipboard by clicking the far-right icon – depicting a viewfinder within a rectangular frame (see screenshot 1).

If you'd prefer to dedicate a single key to this task then we'd suggest getting Microsoft PowerToys – a free download from www.snipca.com/51903. This is a suite of handy little tools, including one called Keyboard Manager that'll let you remap keys.

To remap a key to serve as Print Screen, open PowerToys then, on the left, click Keyboard Manager. Next, in the right-hand pane, click 'Remap a key'. Next, in the 'Remap keys' box, under Select, click to open the dropdown menu then either choose the key you want to use for Print Screen, or simply press it. Then, under 'To send', open the dropdown menu and scroll down to find then click Print Screen (see screenshot 2). Click OK and you're good to go.

Click the far-right icon in the Snipping Tool bar to capture the entire screen





Use Microsoft PowerToys' Keyboard Manager to assign the Print Screen action to a key

Q: Did eBay ban me because I use a VPN?

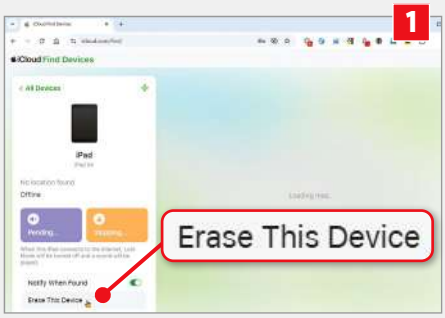
A: Issue 672, page 67 – find it on our 2023 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/48860

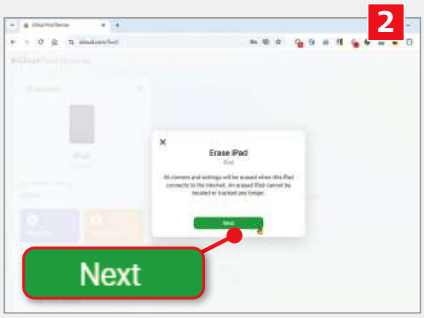
How do I completely wipe my dead iPad?

Q My ageing iPad won't charge or switch on. I've tried the usual recommendations, but it seems to be dead. I'm worried about sending the iPad to the recycling centre without first being able to wipe the data by doing a factory reset. It's too old to justify the cost of a new battery, so, short of using a big hammer, is there anything I can do?

Alan Thomas



In Apple's Find My service, click your iPad then tap Erase This Device...



...then click Next, confirm your Apple password and click Erase

A Well, the hammer method can undoubtedly be effective – but you need to be very careful to avoid piercing lithium-ion batteries with sharp objects, which can be a fire hazard. So, we wouldn't recommend that without first prising the thing apart, so you can target the circuit board and microchips.

However, with an Apple device there are other, better ways. If you have a local Apple store it's worth booking an appointment at the Genius Bar, via www.snipca.com/51898, as the staff can sometimes revive devices by enacting insider hardware tricks that are often not possible or feasible for the average user.

Otherwise, you can use Apple's Find My service to automatically and instantly remotely wipe the device should anyone ever manage to switch it on and connect to Wi-Fi. Once launched, this process cannot be cancelled by anyone other than yourself – so it's a sure-fire way to ensure your personal data will disappear from the device.

To do this, first log into Find My on another Apple device, or log in at www.icloud.com/find. Under 'All Devices', on the left, click your iPad then tap Erase This Device (see screenshot 1) followed by Next 2. Now confirm your Apple password then click Erase to confirm.

Because your iPad is dead, and thus offline, it will now appear under All Devices with an Erase Pending message. If it's ever powered back up and connected to Wi-Fi, the erase will begin immediately.

What's causing this black boot screen?

Q When I switch on my PC I see a black screen that's headed 'American Megatrends'. The only message is to press F1 to recover settings. I do this, which takes me to the BIOS. I then exit, choosing the option to save and I can then access my computer. However, this happens every time. Do you have any ideas as to what the problem is and how to fix it?

Keith MacBain

To fix a black boot screen replace your dead CR2032 battery (right) with new ones (like these from Amazon, above)

A The cause of your problem is something of a perennial on these pages, but it's worth covering every now and then, as it evidently still catches plenty of people unawares. The good news is that it's probably very easy to fix. That's because the cause is almost certainly that the little battery that retains the BIOS memory when mains power is off has run empty.

We don't know what PC you have, but the basic process is the same for all. First, you need to open it up and peer inside the case to locate the little disc-shaped battery. This will almost certainly be a CR2032 type, which are widely available (Amazon sells a six-pack for £4.59 from www.snipca.com/51987, pictured above). With the mains power disconnected, and yourself earthed, use a flat-edged tool to carefully pop out the dead battery (shown inside the red square in our picture above right), then slot in a new one.

Power up your PC, go through the BIOS-setup process once more and then save when exiting. This time, the BIOS data will indeed be saved – and the boot-up message will be no more.

Why do I have to put up with this Adobe suite on my laptop?

Q My new laptop came with a free year's subscription to Adobe Creative Cloud. Frankly, I find most of these programs either too simplistic or too difficult. I am so frustrated by Creative Cloud that whenever I need to do some serious photo editing, I email the images to my desktop PC or my husband's laptop, which still has Adobe Photoshop Elements installed.

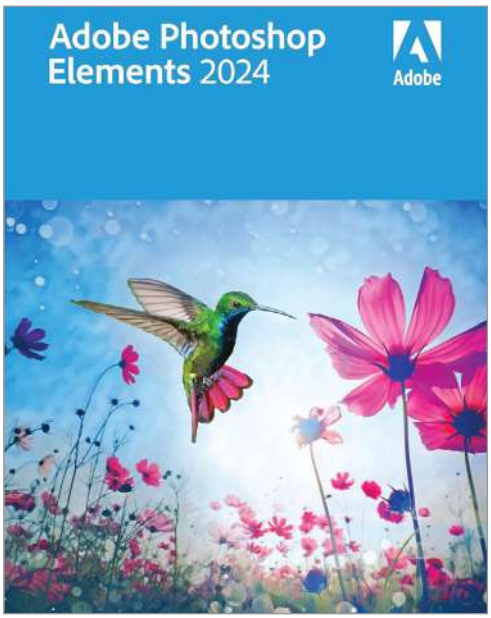
I can't wait for the subscription to run out, so I can download Elements to my own laptop. Why the need to have all these assorted programs? It all seems very confusing to me.

Lynn Sharpe

A You don't have to have or use any of them. But your new laptop included a free subscription to Adobe's Creative Cloud, and at some point you've activated that and installed some or all of the apps (some may have been installed already, of course).

You can unsubscribe at any time by logging in at https://account.adobe.com/plans, then clicking 'Manage plan' followed by 'Cancel your plan'. You can then uninstall the apps from your PC by clicking the Windows Start menu, the Settings cog, then Apps. Next, just click an unwanted app followed by Uninstall, then confirm by clicking Uninstall again.

Creative Cloud is indeed a subscription service, but Photoshop Elements can still be bought as a standalone program, for a one-off cost. Adobe charges £87 (www.snipca.com/51899) for the latest version (2024) – pictured right, but you can get it for just £69.99 on the *Computeractive* Software Store: www.snipca.com/51994.



***Computeractive's* Software Store sells Photoshop Elements 2024 at a discounted price of £69.99**

Does Acrobat Reader have a dark mode?

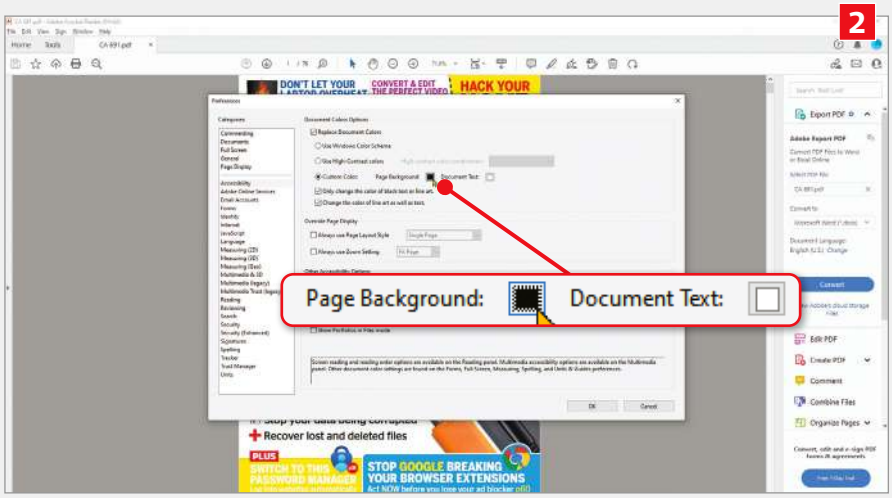
Q I find I'm making more use of the dark modes that some programs offer, as I find it easier on my eyes when using my PC at night. I often read PDFs in Adobe's Acrobat Reader, but I can't find an option to enable dark mode in that app, and Windows 10's own options don't seem to help? Do you know if Reader has one? And if so, where is it?

Roger Bennett

A Reader doesn't have an official dark mode, though these themes are so popular that we can see Adobe adding one sooner or later. In the meantime, you can use the tool's accessibility options to create a workaround.

First, open the Edit menu (see screenshot 1), then choose Preferences. In the Categories list on the left, click Accessibility. Next, in the right-hand pane, under Document Color Options, tick the Replace Document Colors box, choose the Custom Color option, then use the Page Background and Document Text options 2 to choose the colours you want – black for the background, say, and white or yellow for text. Finally, click OK.

To create a dark mode workaround in Acrobat Reader, first open the Edit menu...



...then use these two settings to choose your PDF background and text colours

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

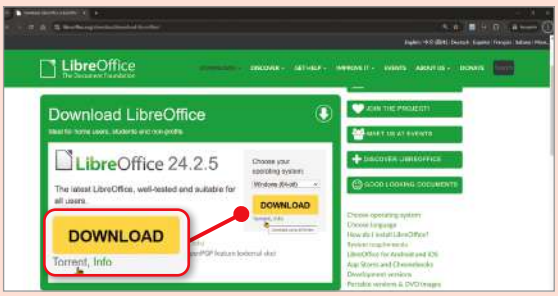
Torrent and magnet links?

Q I noticed that LibreOffice is available via BitTorrent, so I thought I'd give that a try – as I've always been curious about the system. I downloaded a program called qBittorrent and downloaded the '.torrent' file from the LibreOffice website at www.snipca.com/51900 (pictured). When I opened this in qBittorrent, LibreOffice began downloading.

Later, I thought I'd explore other things to download. I found links to both Torrent files and also Magnet links. I don't know the difference, so I've stuck with Torrent files for now. I'm also a bit worried about the legality, but presumably a company like LibreOffice wouldn't offer a BitTorrent option if it was a dodgy system? Can you advise.

George Barnes

A Let's work in reverse. There's nothing inherently illegal about the existence or usage of BitTorrent. So, The Document Foundation (TDF), which is the organisation that makes LibreOffice, is doing nothing wrong in using BitTorrent to distribute its software. Nor are you by downloading LibreOffice in this way. Indeed, doing so is actually better for TDF, because it doesn't have to cover the bandwidth costs related to downloads made this way, as they instead come via the countless other 'peers' that seed LibreOffice via BitTorrent.



You can download the LibreOffice Torrent file from the company's website

However, it is undeniable that BitTorrent is primarily used to download films and other copyrighted material. If you're doing that, then you need to be aware that your actions are against the law in the UK and much of the rest of the world.

So, this just leaves the difference between Torrent files (with a '.torrent' extension) and Magnet links – and there's a clue in how we just described them. The former are small files containing the metadata and tracker information needed to start a BitTorrent download, but must first themselves be downloaded (though they're tiny, so it barely matters).

Magnet links, on the other hand, are self-contained URLs that contain all this same information – so there's no need to download a separate file. For this reason, generally, Magnet links are more versatile, as they can be shared over email or social media, say, without attaching a separate (.torrent) file.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

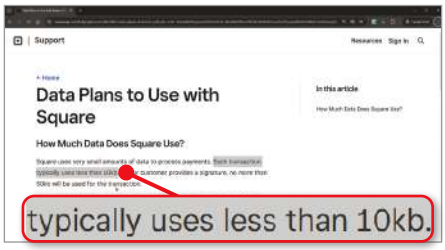
Do I need much mobile data to accept card payments?

Q I'm the treasurer of a local art society, and have a Square card reader for taking card payments. Usually, we have free local Wi-Fi but this isn't always available at venues we visit. I know I can use my mobile phone to connect, but I don't have a huge mobile-data allowance. I'm wondering what is the best way to ensure I have a connection when away from our usual Wi-Fi, to process any sales?

I could ask BT, my network provider, to increase my data limit and tether the reader to my phone – but I wonder if it'd be cheaper to pay for a local connection? Any help would be greatly appreciated.

Shirley Batten-Smith

A We don't know how much data is included in your mobile contract, but it's worth knowing just how little of it a Square transaction is likely to consume. Square itself says this is typically around 10Kb (see screenshot), but would never be more than 50Kb (where a signature is transmitted). By modern data standards, these are minuscule amounts.



Each transaction on a Square card reader typically uses just 10Kb of mobile data

For simplicity's sake, a megabyte is around 1,000 kilobytes – and a gigabyte is around 1,000 megabytes. So, there are around a million kilobytes in a gigabyte. If your mobile contract includes a gigabyte of data – which is about the minimum for any plan these days – that'd be enough for at least 20,000 signature-based transactions with Square, or 100,000 standard transactions.

If you're selling more art pieces than that in a month, you can probably afford to pay for an add-on to your existing BT data plan: it costs just over a fiver for an extra half-gigabyte (www.snipca.com/51902) – or another 50,000 Square transactions. In short, for your purposes, your phone is the way forward.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 23 Oct

- Can I make Windows 8.1 safe to use?
- How do I open my old Organizer files?
- What's eating all my storage? ...And many more

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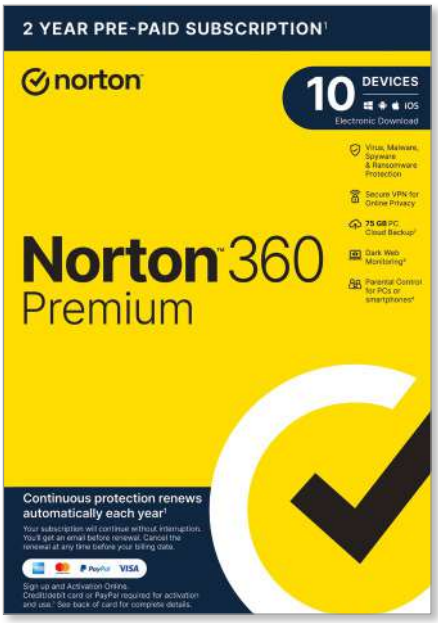

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Can I create a bootable DVD for Tiny 11?

Q Back in Issue 670 (page 60) you explained how to create a bootable USB stick for Tiny11 (www.snipca.com/51092), which installs a lightweight version of Windows 11. However, I can't get it to boot despite fiddling about in the UEFI/BIOS – and I've tried it with two separate 10-year-old PCs. Instead of using a USB stick, can I create a bootable DVD for the 3.5GB Tiny11 OS?

Alan Oatey

A Looking back at our original instructions in Issue 670, we do mention creating a CD from the ISO file as an alternative to making a bootable USB stick (see the top of page 61). However, a 650MB CD-R doesn't have enough storage capacity for the 3.5GB Tiny11 ISO file so, as you suggest, you would need to use a 4.7GB blank DVD.

Assuming you have a recordable DVD drive, creating a bootable disc from an ISO file is fairly straightforward. Insert a blank DVD into the drive, then open a File Explorer window and locate your saved Tiny11 ISO file. Right-click the ISO file, select 'Burn disc image' then choose your DVD drive from the 'Disc burner' dropdown menu (see screenshot below) and click Burn.

Right-click your ISO file, select 'Burn disc image', then choose your DVD drive

Were you wrong to advise creating partition for Photoshop?

Q In Issue 688 (page 64) you answered Allan Bolton's question ('How do I make my old software work in Windows 11?') by suggesting he create a small partition on a hard drive and install Photoshop 7 there. I don't see why this is necessary. It's only for saving files that it requires less than 1TB of space. If you get a 'hard drive full' error, Photoshop can still read and display files from any size of drive. My computer has hard drives up to 8TB, but the drive I use for saving files is a 981GB partition – and it works perfectly. Should you update the advice you gave?

John Francis

A Allan Bolton's 'Scratch disk full' error is a well-documented problem that occurs when you install the 22-year-old Photoshop 7.0 software on to a drive that has more than 1TB of space. The issue has nothing to do with where you save files, as you suggest, but with which drive Photoshop uses for temporary storage while it's running.

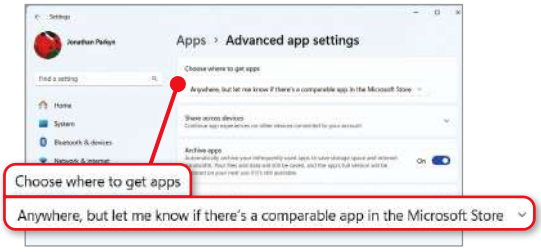
Allan stated that his drive's capacity is 2TB. In his case, the best way to get Photoshop 7.0 running would be to partition the drive, then install Photoshop on the smaller partition, as we advised him to do in Issue 688.

In your case, it sounds as if you have multiple drives totalling 8TB, but the drive with Photoshop installed has 981GB of space. This is just below the program's 1TB limit, which explains why the software is working for you without the need to create a smaller partition.

Why can't I install Files 3.5?

Q I tried installing Files 3.5 (www.snipca.com/51182), as recommended by you in Issue 688 (page 17), but I can't get it to work. When I'm logged in as an administrator and have administrator privileges, Windows delivers an 'Access Denied' message. When I log in but give the installation administrator privileges, it reports that 'An error has occurred because a user was logged off'. I hope you can help – otherwise I'm stuck with File Explorer.

Phil Verity



Choose this option to ensure you can install apps that are not from the Microsoft Store

A We were able to install Files 3.5 on two separate test PCs without seeing any error messages, so we're not sure what's causing your problem. Is it possible that you clicked the wrong download link? As we stated in our original review, you need to click the 'classic installer' link, which appears in small letters on the tool's web page, rather than the large 'Download Files' button, which takes you to the (paid) Microsoft Store version.

Our review also mentioned that you may need to uninstall the previous version before you can install the new one, so it's worth checking (under Settings, Apps) that you don't have an older version of Files installed. While you're there, check under Settings, Apps, 'Advanced app settings' to make sure the option 'Anywhere, but let me know...' is selected in the 'Choose where to get apps' section (see screenshot above).

If you still can't install Files, you could also check and, if necessary, reset the Microsoft Store to see if this helps. We don't have room here to print the instructions, but you could try following the steps outlined by Greg Carmack on this Microsoft Answers page: www.snipca.com/51443.

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

Administrator Someone who can make changes to a computer that will affect others who also use it.

AI Artificial intelligence. Intelligence demonstrated by a machine rather than a human being.

Alpha A version of software containing features that are still being tested. Comes before Beta in the lifecycle of a program.

AMOLED Active-Matrix Organic Light-Emitting Diode. An alternative technology to LCD for creating flat-panel displays. Most commonly used in smartphones, tablets and smartwatches.

ARC Audio return channel. A feature on TVs that lets audio signals travel both to and from the TV via a single HDMI cable.

Architecture A set of rules and language that govern how hardware and software work.

Aspect ratio A measurement of the shape of a screen. Traditional PC screens are 4:3. Widescreen displays are 16:9 or 16:10.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

BIOS Basic Input-Output System. Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

BitTorrent A technology for downloading files. Allows even very large files to be downloaded quickly.

Bootable Describes a device or disc with system files on it so it can be used to start up your computer.

Bot Automated software designed to perform specific tasks.

Captcha Distorted text that websites ask you to type to prove you're a human.

Cast To send content from your PC, phone or tablet to TV.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot A computer program designed to recreate conversation with human users.

Code Programming languages used to create software.

Command line A way to control a computer by typing instructions one at a time. In Windows this is called the Command Prompt.

Compression The process of reducing the size of files by encoding the data inside them. ZIP files are an example of compression.

CPU Central Processing Unit. Another term for a computer processor.

Dark mode Showing white text on a black background.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

Dolby Atmos Surround-sound technology that adds 'height' to the audio through speakers built into the top of devices.

Dolby Vision Dolby's HDR (High Dynamic Range) screen technology.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with external devices.

DTS: Virtual X A type of surround-sound technology.

Emoji A small graphic that can be added to a text message or email.

Emulation The process of programming one computer to act like another.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows. Has the file extension .exe.

ExifTool Program that can read, write and edit metadata in a variety of files.

Factory reset Restoring a device to its default settings.

False positive When an antivirus program wrongly detects a malware infection.

Forked When developers take source code from software to make another related program.

FTTP Fibre-to-the premises. Fibre broadband that goes straight to the doorstep. Faster than FTTC (fibre-to-the-cabinet).

GitHub A site where software developers can share code, and where users can download programs. Owned by Microsoft.

GPU Graphics Processor Unit. A chip designed to create 3D graphics, but which can also be used for other computing tasks.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

HDMI 2.1 Provides more bandwidth, nearly tripling what the current 2.0 standard provides.

HDR High dynamic range. Screen technology that improves the range of luminance between the darkest and brightest parts.

HDR10+ High dynamic range 10. Current industry standard for TVs.

Heatsink A block of metal used to help dissipate the heat from a computer chip.

HLG A new high-definition TV format jointly developed by the BBC and Japanese broadcaster NHK.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

IP65 International Protection marking. Dust-proof, and protected from water jets at any angle.

IP67 Denotes that a device is resistant to dust, general dirt and sand and can be placed underwater for 30 minutes at depths of up to 1m.

IPS A screen technology. Monitors that use it have wider viewing angles and better, more accurate colours than monitors that do not use this technology.

ISO file A type of image file that contains data from a CD or DVD.

Java A programming language used to create some software and internet tools.

KHz Kilohertz. A measure of frequency used in various applications involving radio, video and sound waves.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light. Used on almost all electronic devices, and to provide the backlight for some LCDs.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MP4 A type of digital movie file often used for portable players.

NPU Neural processing unit. Specialised chip designed for performing AI tasks.

OLED Organic light-emitting diode. A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in computer displays and television screens.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

Phono A term often used to describe standard stereo (red and white) audio connections.

Privileges Special permissions that let a user perform advanced actions on a computer or network that would otherwise be restricted.

QLED Quantum Light-Emitting Diode. A screen technology that uses nanoparticles called quantum dots to boost brightness and colour.

Quad core A computer that has four processors on a single chip, which allows it to operate faster than standard (single-core) computers.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

RCA plug Part of an RCA connector used to carry audio and video signals.

RCS Rich Communication Services. A method of sending text messages over phones with more features than SMS, such as photos and videos.

Read speed How long it takes a hard drive to 'read' data, and respond to it.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Refurbished A second-hand or damaged device that has been repaired by its manufacturer so it can be resold and reused.

Remap To change the function of a key on your keyboard so it performs another task.

Response time How fast a coloured pixel turns to white and back again.

RGB keyboard Advanced type of LED backlit keyboard that generates combinations of red, green and blue lights.

Script A program stored on a web server to control part of a website. For example, a script could check a date you have entered is valid.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

Seed A user or computer in a BitTorrent network that has a complete copy of the file being shared and continues to upload it to others.

SIM Subscriber Identity Module. The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

sRGB A standard RGB colour space for use on monitors, printers and the internet.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that uses no moving parts.

Switch Mechanism under a keyboard that determines whether a key has been pressed.

Tag A keyword used to describe a file or web page. Many programs use tags to help organise related information quickly.

TOPS Tera operations per second. A measure of a PC's processing power when performing AI tasks.

Tethering Turning a phone into a modem to give internet access to a computer.

UEFI Unified Extensible Firmware Interface. A modern replacement for the BIOS.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1 Faster successors to USB.

USB-C A connector that's reversible.

VA Vertical Alignment. A form of LCD in which the liquid crystals naturally align vertically.

VPN Virtual private network. Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

Widget A small program such as a calendar that runs on the Windows desktop.

Wi-Fi 6E Wi-Fi 6 extended to include the 6GHz band.

Write speed How long it takes a hard drive to save data.

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Know How

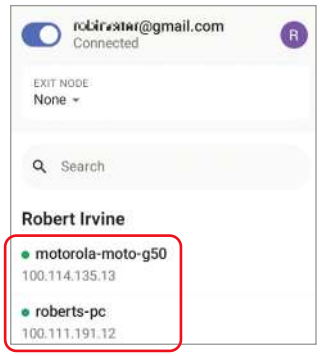
Determined to find a new use for his old phone, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Create a portable file vault

It's that time of year when many of my colleagues are 'abuzz' about the latest iPhone, and the slightly different specifications it has to the previous model. Not me, though – I've sworn my allegiance to Android, and the last time I was abuzz was when a dozy bee landed on my pillow.

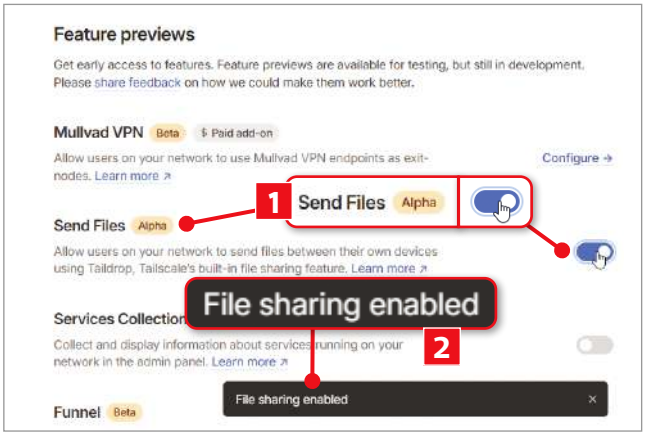
> So I can now back up files securely to my newly created portable vault simply by right-clicking them in File Explorer

I've been buying Motorola phones for the past 10 years, because they offer a decent set of features for an affordable (under-£200) price. My current handset, the Moto G84, has a mighty 256GB of storage, which is more than enough for testing apps for my day job. Its predecessor – the Moto G50 – still works fine, but the battery life isn't great so it's been relegated to my gadget-graveyard drawer.



Robert easily connected both his PC and phone to his 'tailnet'

Robert switched on the Taildrop feature in Tailscale to back up files to his phone



I came across the old phone the other day and, because I won't get much money for selling it, wondered if I could use it for another purpose – or 'upcycle' it, in the modern parlance. With its 64GB of storage and fingerprint lock, I could turn it into a secure, portable back-up device for important files. But how would I copy over data without faffing around with a USB cable or uploading to 'the cloud'?

The answer came from a service called Tailscale (https://tailscale.com) and its clever Taildrop feature (www.snipca.com/52059). This lets you transfer files between devices, including from your PC to your phone, over an encrypted network, without any size limits.

I signed up for a free Tailscale account, then downloaded and installed its Windows software (www.snipca.com/52060). Once I'd logged in, I was prompted to connect my PC to my 'tailnet' (Tailscale network), which was as easy as clicking a button.

Next, I needed to install the Tailscale app on my old Android phone. This initially posed a problem because my Moto G50 no longer had a SIM card to get it online, but connecting to my Wi-Fi network provided the obvious solution.

I downloaded the app from the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/52061), tapped Get Started and gave it permission to set up a VPN connection. I then logged into my Tailscale account, and successfully connected the phone to my tailnet. This now listed both my PC and phone (see screenshot left), so everything was clearly working as intended – fairly unusual for this column, as regular readers will be all too aware.

It was now time to try transferring some files. On my computer, I right-clicked the Tailscale icon in the system tray, selected 'Admin console' and clicked the Settings tab. In the 'Feature previews' section, I switched on the Send Files setting (1 in our screenshot above) to activate Taildrop. The feature is apparently still in alpha, which felt quite reckless and exciting.

With file-sharing enabled 2, I could send the first item to my phone. I right-clicked a file in File Explorer, chose the new 'Send with Tailscale' option and selected my Moto G50 in the window that opened.

This seemed to transfer the file, but my phone gave no indication that it had received it. I tried again with a different file, but again no notification. A quick glance at the Taildrop how-to guide suggested looking in the Downloads folder on my Android device, and – lo and behold – there sat the two files from my PC.

So I'm now able to back up files securely to my newly created portable vault simply by right-clicking them in File Explorer. Nobody can access them, unless they steal my finger to unlock my phone, and even then they won't know to check in the Downloads folder. It's nice to have a Tail with a happy ending.

Need help creating a portable file-storage system? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to download Street View panoramas

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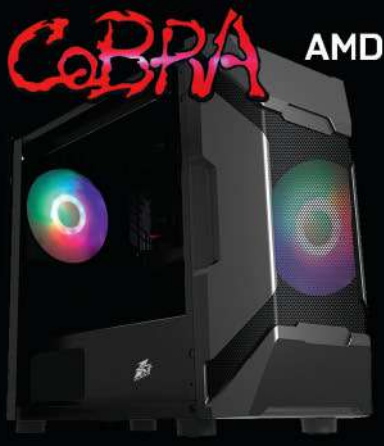

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